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Conversation:
An Interview with
AbdouMaliq Simone

CONVERSATION – An Interview with AbdouMaliq Simone

By Hector Fernando Burga

About the Interviewee

AbdouMaliq Simone is an urbanist and professor of sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Since 1977 he has many jobs in different cities across Africa and Southeast Asia, in the fields of education, housing, social welfare, community development, local government and economic development. His best known publications are *In Whose Image: Political Islam and Urban Practices in the Sudan* and *For the City Yet to Come: Urban change in Four African Cities*. A forthcoming book is entitled *Movement at the Crossroads: City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*.

HFB: How did you become interested in writing about African cities?

AMS: I spent a large part of my childhood in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in a kind of situation which was fairly folded in a parochial community, a network of people who didn't have a lot of money. They couldn't spread themselves out into the surrounding urban area. So there was this kind of mixed existence; being part of a complicated neighborhood, but also being apart and withdrawn from the city and folded in a network of schools and institutions, a kind of expatriate community that didn't have a lot of money and had precarious status. In some ways this is how I grew up and later on in late adolescence, early adulthood, I escaped back to West Africa. It was at that moment that I revisited these memories and began to have an interest in African cities.

HFB: You received a degree in psychology here in the Berkeley area, correct?

AMS: Yes at the Wright Institute.

HFB: Yet, eventually you entered the world of development practice.

AMS: Yes

HFB: Was that something that happened by chance? Or was it an engagement based on prior experiences?

AMS: I dropped out of university after one semester and had some personal connections in the world in psychiatry. I had to do something and this was it. But the kind of institutions in New York, the kinds of networks I was involved with, were very much oriented toward community psychiatry. At that moment in American psychiatric history there was a great deal of focus on working on localities and social networks. My first jobs were in this kind of inter-sect oral, interdisciplinary work, in urban areas of the Bronx and Brooklyn. When I decided to leave the professional practice of clinical work this phase represented a touchstone, an orientation that I could come back to. Issues of housing and local economic development, which during the 1970's, were major issues in psychology became less dominant as time went on.

HFB: But the City as a topic was not necessarily something that you thought about as a central subject? You are recognized as an urban theorist and when we read your work you produce urban theory. How did the city become a scope, a framework, a scale, a source of analysis?

AMS: I think the formative work around this question occurred when I was asked by various Muslim social welfare organizations to think about what was taking place with Muslim residents in cities in West Africa countries. Particularly in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, where Muslim residents seem to be marginalized in various dimensions of their everyday lives.

Even though in all of these countries you had very strong professional religious-political networks, there was something about the way in which many of the residents didn't fully come to grips with their possibilities of being in the city. So there were several projects over a period of years, from the 1970's to the 1980's, where I collaborated in coming up with new concepts of schools, new concepts of neighborhood organizations, new ways of intensifying and extending the engagement of a particularly kind of majority in Muslim neighborhoods in cities such as Abidjan and Accra. In this respect, I think that I was trying to rethink the way in which spaces, histories, and precedents were articulated into a larger system. Then I began to think about what kind of system it actually was. So I think that was the key issue. I also taught at different African universities. I was

teaching psychology formally, but often times these universities where closed down for a variety of reasons, so I had to find other ways to make money, other things to do.

HFB: In *For a City Yet to Come* you attempt to reproduce a fleeting provisionality that defines African cities in your work by deploying a writing style. How did you come up with this method? A way of writing that replicates the object that you are writing about. Was this an intended project from the beginning, or did it arise from within the process of your own intellectual development?

AMS: There are several things. In the late 70's and early 80's I was very close to the Italian Autonomists. As such, I was trying to participate in a larger project, searching for ways of narrating processes through which young workers, particularly in Italy and other parts of Europe, were trying to rethink their relationship to work, the communist party and ways of representing their position and sensibilities. So I immersed myself in that kind of experimentation which in New York happened within a circle of people who were in exile from Italy and who tried to forge linkages with certain kinds of African American sensibilities on writing about cities over a long period of time. This also occurred as I became immersed in a post-structural, post-political, theoretical framework. I did a lot of experimentation in writing with different groups of people, particularly in the use of writing as a way of interweaving very different kinds of situations, geographical locations, and types of political positions in local and global frameworks. That experience became an important resource.

Another important resource was taking consulting jobs while I lived in Africa and taught at different universities, living under the straightjacket of having to deploy a particular way of representing policy and urban issues. I was exposed to the way in which certain parameters were enforced by African higher universities and African professionals. By having discussions with students and other young researchers, who in formal convocations reiterated a kind of claustrophobic way of thinking about urban issues, and afterwards in more informal settings exhibited a whole different way of speaking about things, I began to understand the constraints. I understood why within the political exigencies of African universities emerging professionals would always have to adhere to particular kind of narrative. But I wasn't necessarily bound to it even as a pedagogical tool in universities. With the people I have worked

with, I have tried to go towards a different kind direction, a counter-point which recognized the language of statistics, the counting, the framing, but also which tried to undo them.

For example, when I lived in Sudan, for three years I collaborated on a project with a theater school. The theater school was probably the most diverse, complicated, cosmopolitan kind of professional entity in Khartoum. It had Islamists, communists and members from prominent Sufi families from all over. It had people from diverse backgrounds who lived together in a kind of slum, apart from the university. We spent two years going around and trying to experiment, not just documenting evidence, but intervening in a performance project and figuring out different ways of making little things happen, a kind of acupuncture in a way. This was an important experience in order to consider the kinds of issues which appear seemingly minimal and simple of urban formations. They will always remain to a large degree opaque and ephemeral, without having the pretense of being comprehensive and accurate, but their truthfulness, their ethics, come from trying to be as respectful and faithful as you can with the processes you feel are having an impact on you and on your relationships with other people.

HFB: **The notion of performance is something that I have witnessed in your presentations at Berkeley. It seems to me that your writing follows a particular rhythm or music. Yet when you give a presentation certain qualities; opaqueness, visibility and invisibility – akin to the heuristic devices you deploy in *For a City Yet to Come*- are also evident. Where does this notion of performance come from?**

ABS: I was very much influenced by Sun Ra. When I came back to Chicago from Sierra Leone, I was influenced by people involved in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. In the neighborhood where I lived in Chicago you performed confluences. I also grew up in the black church to a large extent, so I am in touch with its cadences and its passion.

HFB: **What role has religion played in your work? In *For a City yet to Come* you focus on the interconnections between religious practices and urban activists in African cities.**

AMS: At one point in my life I was an Islamic activist. This provided me with jobs and opportunities. For example, I would have never been able to live three years in Sudan and I would have never been able to carry out my earlier work in West Africa. At

another level, as a Muslim and considering the West African tradition of hospitality offered to traveling Muslims, I would have never been able to have the kind of experiences of moving around that I had. So there is definitely a kind of pragmatic aspect to it, but also in terms of religion, as someone who is by nature without any social skills, it has become a way of giving me a kind courage, persistence and ethics to do stuff that I would otherwise never have been able to do.

HFB: **Turning to some of the critical points that you raise in regards to international development practices in African cities. How do you see yourself as a critic of international development while acting as a development practitioner? Is this a tension that allows you develop a space a type of critical urban theory derived you're your concrete experiences in the field? How do you manage this tension?**

AMS: Right now I am helping an organization in Jakarta that is trying to develop a mass membership organization for the poor. They have been working in this area for a long time, on very local projects, but they are now trying to move towards a larger political entity. So I have been with this organization for several years, in a very modest way, six weeks every year.

Theoretically I don't agree with a lot of what they do –but I do believe the work and effort is crucial because it lends visibility to a wide range of conflictual assumptions that always require detailed, small, and temporary accommodations. It is important for me to be engaged because I don't want to have engagements which are tailored made to my point of view. So it's a kind of ongoing struggle to try to be useful. They think that I read certain dynamics in the city which might be useful to them, but this reading is only useful as it affects the imaginations and politics of deal that have to be consistently made. My interest is not in any kind of trajectory of development. In how you develop a particular locality over a period of time, cities are full of different kinds of temporalities and logics that are very contradictory. My interest is how you draw lines between things that on the surface don't seem to fit together, or wouldn't seem to have any type of interaction, but whose actions, if you are going to draw those lines, are a matter of deals.

It's not about finding the right conceptual framework that allow you to see them, but to uncover the varied kinds of arduous, complicated, persistent ways, one makes deals and trade-offs. For me, development work is about that. It's a kind of

incessant pragmatism which tries to circumvent the constraints that exist to conceptually enforce the actions of certain kinds of relationships. I like to be involved in these kinds of urban pragmatic practices because it is there where you start to discover other potentialities.

HFB: **So who is your audience, who do you write for?**

AMS: Well the books and some of the journal articles that I write are academic constructions. I am aware of the kind's criticisms which point at how one has to be careful about the dynamics of cities in the South and their political complexities. I want to take those kinds of issues head on. I want to use my academic position as a way of re-imagining the potentialities of cities in the South but in ways that neither romanticize or celebrate what they represent. It's hard to find a way to make these kinds of dynamics important for urban theory and urban thinking in general. I use my position to do so. Therefore my audience is basically composed of other academics and urban theorists, but there is also a whole other series of writing; working papers, documents and policy briefs. Here in Jakarta, I have written some things for the press and help people prepare briefing documents for the governor. So there are very different kinds of outputs. It's not that the topics, issues or the content is different, rather it becomes harder because I have to put it in a language that travels and could be understood.

I have found myself in the last 10 years solidly back in academia. You have to play that game. And I would like to play the game in as an interesting way as I can. In some ways I would like to have something to say to philosophers, to ethnographers, to planners, to urban engineers. I don't pretend to successfully do it, but in some ways, I would like to.

HFB: **I am looking at one of the lat articles that you wrote - Emergency Democracy and the Governing Composite - and I found several questions in the article interesting. I quote: "Given cost and technical complexities certain locations are more viable than others in engineering terms. How do these locations correspond with the most viable social locations in that community?" You continue: "How can often wildly divergent orientations of every day community life with their own visions about well-being and the future, collaborate over important decisions such as the distribution of essential resources within the community?"**

You pose these questions in the process of describing several development strategies deployed in the localities in African cities, yet I couldn't help to think that these questions could be equally valuable to community development practitioners in the United States. What do you think about posing questions of practice in African cities to cities in the US?

AMS: I can answer by offering two different examples. Kinshasa is a city that in some sense is the biggest village in the world, probably with 9 to 10 million people living in conditions that are hardly discernable as urban. While it has areas that are very dense, you have the sense that it is not a city rather it is a huge dense rural area. People get up really early and often times walk a long way to find transportation.

This is a city without a functioning municipal government. It has a budget of 25 million dollars a year which is about 30% of the municipal budget of Antwerp. So you have a city with a budget of almost nothing. In a city where people really don't have a clear idea of how they are going to put bread on the table everyday and where people feel they have no legitimate basis to intervene in each others life, how do you say that people should get together and organize to clean the streets? What does this mean? Is it a way to collecting money, a trick? It is very difficult to grasp any sense of organization, in the conventional sense of organization as we know it. But yet what is remarkable about Kinshasa is the ability of a people to come up with the right things to say, in the inevitable and frequent situations when things are about to get out of hand.

Since there are churches, it's not as if institutions are absent. But to a certain extent there is a dearth of diverse institutional forms that provide people with a sense of mediation, anchorage and mapping things out. What is amazing to me about Kinshasa is the way in which complete strangers can come up to each other with the right thing to say during these moments of quotidian crises, on buses on streets, offices, neighborhoods. And somehow there is this kind of mobility, a circulation of ideas, gestures and sentiments that can be deployed and enable things to be held together.

I am not necessarily trying to celebrate this kind of capacity, or making it something more than it is. I am simply saying that there is reticence in cities of the North, a kind of fear in regards to different kinds of experimentations or ways of governing and managing both the built and social environment in different

localities of the city. There is a fear that things will fall apart and I wonder to what extent a place like Kinshasa raises the question of whether we are blocking certain potentialities of the density of transactions in urban life, which in their circulation and impact draw people into collaborative possibilities that we simply don't recognize. Therefore the continuous kinds of obsession regarding institution building, capacity development, transparency and accountability present in certain kinds of organization discourses become their own world. We remain not quite sure what we are trying to accomplish from them.

HFB: **Given the mutability of the associations that you describe in your writings, how can we look at cities in the global south and conceive of progressive social change? Is this another development myth? How can a "progressive" notion of social change occur in the urban environments that you describe?**

AMS: I think there can be multiple tracks. It is interesting for me to see the way in which certain districts are changing in the context of Jakarta. Different kinds of actors and residents are becoming more mobile in their navigation of the city in order to maintain stability within a changing global economy. Because of the way that accumulation and productivity are concretely managed in major metropolitan areas like Jakarta, they can no longer count upon their positions within certain social and patron networks for accessibility and survival. They have to be much more particular, specific and specialized in regards to what they do economically.

This means that they have to be more flexible. This flexibility introduces larger measures of volatility within the districts. That volatility is then managed by extending their investments of time and energy to other parts of the city. Those efforts constitute a proposition for how their own district can be linked and articulated with other districts.

But at the same time this layering doesn't obviate the work of more conventional political instruments. We find in the persistence of certain kinds of agglomeration economies; districts specializing in textile, furniture or automotive production really complicated production layers. Each layer passes on the cost and profitability on to the next layer. So as you get to the bottom of the layer there is no negotiating position. If you look at these sectors as a whole, they are caught up in limited ways of survival because they have no mechanisms, no tools to change or negotiate their articulation politically in the larger metropolis.

So how can one deploy different types of political instruments not simply from the vantage point of residents in a particular territorial location, status, or consolidation? How are these instruments linked to a larger set of issues which correspond to the metropolis to make themselves move viable, provide greater flexibility and benefit different tiers of residents within them? I think a great deal of effort remains in how one can concretely alter these kinds of relationships. It may not be under a kind of larger rubric, a greater fight for social justice, or by significantly changing the livelihood of the urban poor, but rather in concrete, focused efforts.

The role of taking seriously these kinds of political experimentations is important. I don't disagree with larger discourses on progressive urban change, but if there could be more people involved in trying to work with these kinds of issues through the various tracks in which residents concretize their everyday lives; their collaboration, intersecting trajectories, organizations, the propositions they make by appropriating history, networks, one could be informed by their often times complicated practices to re-negotiate a sense of stability and opportunity. These practices will always take place. But given this factor what role is there for particular kinds of political instrumentalities to be at work? I think they are not to be exclusive.

HFB: It strikes me how you respond to my questions by relying on specific case studies. This approach makes me consider that you are anchoring theory with concrete examples and concrete experiences. If we consider the case study as a basis of ethnographic research, how can you mark the constant changes and multiple levels that you describe? How do you make them visible through your own brand of ethnography?

AMS: There are a number of things that have been useful for me. I have a long term relationship with different kinds of organizations in cities. These organizations have often been composed with people of different kinds of skills; religious activists, government workers and artists. My long term relationship with them provides me with different kinds of entry points into networks, trades and localities.

What has also been important is that the work that I have done with institutions over the years has focused on how to assist people in these localities, or trades in mapping their own processes. They always talk to each other about what is

going on, they have that, but during these collaborations they begin to do something differently. They begin to talk and act as researchers. What is very interesting to me is their discussions on how the research process for them differs or is similar to the conversations in which they usually just talk about what is going on. That difference becomes an interesting tension in terms of how they see things. Sometimes we come in and ask them what it is that they see. Then we collaborate with artists who work with visual representations. These different kinds of approaches have involved people in a kind of self-reflexivity or an intentional mapping of their own work. It wasn't an academic exercise, however. It was mostly a process of mapping their own work as a political process that gets deployed according to their ability to collaborate with others in other parts of the city or in different cities to make proposals with different municipalities.

It is because of that kind of concrete work that I have been able to focus very much on particular cases and examples. By placing the examples upfront, they become mediations for different points of view. They become the object of mediation through which people argue about those points of view. Since they provide the source for arguments, they become vehicles for me. By simply putting myself in the situations I can just talk to anyone; I can follow very strange trajectories. So there is a certain degree of discovery, accident or surprise. There is also a tension between varied kinds of tedious, long term micro-organizational stuff, and simply the kind of arbitrariness, the elements of surprise of finding yourself in a situation that you never thought you would be.

HFB: **That is where theories of the everyday, become important for your interpretation of practices in the cities you study. How do you apply theory to these case studies? As graduate students we struggle with the question: How does one deploy a theoretical framework? As an urban researcher how does one use this tool called theory?**

AMS: I am afraid my answer is not going to be very interesting. I have a great passion for theory. Sitting often times when I was very young in nightshifts at a psychiatric ward, I would read theory. I try to be well read. But I have to re-read things a billion times over to feel that I have really grasped it. This has been a kind of separate track from the work I do in the field.

Theory is not a way to understand what is going on; rather it is more a kind of tool to try to convey a message not as a

serious judgment but as a force. Theory does have a force, because people read it and it brings them into connection with each other. So if you have something that may be conveyed using these kinds of terms, then it might be a way to impact a particular kind of audience. It may expose a certain kind of reality to the situation, a certain kind of complexity.

I think that we confer to theory the possibilities of complex formulations, but we don't confer this condition to realities that we encounter in cities. We try to simplify them; we try to make them into concrete manifestations of macro-structural processes under which residents have their own simplified practices.

Why don't we think about how the relationships between people, stuff and space could give rise to new understandings? Therefore, for me theory is not so much a way to try to understand, its more an instrument to convey, a kind of clothing, a kind of dress under which one can make a message travel in ways in which it would not otherwise travel.

HFB: Lastly, in concluding, what are your future plans? What can we look forward in your work?

AMS: There will be a book out in December "City life from Jakarta to Dakar". It looks at a band of cities across Africa and South East Asia. I am trying to write about them as if they were part of the same neighborhood, part of the same hood, in different ways part of the same game. So I am trying to understand the possibilities of these kinds of relationships and partly I do so by thinking about what heterogeneous experiences of black urban residents across all parts of the world... what can that history tell us potentially about challenges in cities in the global south.

HFB: Thank you for your time AbdouMaliq.

AMS: Thank you.

Hector Fernando Burga is a PhD candidate in the Department of City and Regional Planning at University of California Berkeley. He is an architect and urban designer whose research focuses on planning issues in the city of Miami and the globalization of place-making professional practices.