Call for contributions to Urban Studies Foundation (USF) Seminar Series in Benin (English Version).

Seminar Series: Urban politics and negotiated stateness: Comparative perspectives across Africa and Eastern Europe

Partnering Institutions: USF Seminar Series Awards Grant (grant code: USF-SSA-250610) from the Urban Studies Foundation (USF); University College London (UCL), UK; University of Tallinn, Estonia; and Civic Academy for Africa's Future (CiAAF), Benin.

We are pleased to invite you to submit a proposal to present a paper at or to attend our seminar and graduate workshop in Benin titled **"Africa through connections: learning from elsewhere, theorising from Africa"** as part of this Seminar Series.

The series brings together scholars from and specialising in Africa and Eastern Europe to engage with research and theoretical insights drawn from across these two contexts on analyses of urban politics, especially interrogating the nature of state agency in urban development. We will also be exploring innovative comparative methodologies for cross-regional analysis. The workshop in Benin will focus on how tracing connections from African contexts can help to build comparative insights on urban developments there, and how this methodology might be used to expand the conversation between scholars in Africa and Eastern Europe. Some key themes and references are indicated below which could be useful in guiding abstract proposals. Some of the background readings which have informed the seminar series can be found here.

Description

Despite increasing calls to decenter knowledge production and move beyond dominant Western perspectives, limited attention has been given to theoretical endeavours from underrepresented regions (Müller et al, 2025). However, these contexts are far from lacking in theoretical innovation, providing opportunities to deconstruct and challenge entrenched analyses (Pobłocki, 2013; Ferenčuhová, 2016; Müller and Trubina, 2020; Robinson, 2022). Both African and Eastern European urban scholars have grappled with the complexities of state actors in urban development (Ion, 2014; Cirolia and Harber, 2022; Igué, 1999), and our series will showcase how they are well

poised to contribute to a nascent debate on the role of the state in urban development (Shatkin, 2022).

There is analytical concern for understanding the nature of state agency in both Africa and Eastern Europe, and we are inspired to foster interactions amongst scholars from both regions to develop insights and methodologies for cross-regional analysis of negotiated and emergent statehood in urban politics. Much of the existing theorisation on urban politics, rooted in Western contexts, fails to capture the fluid and negotiated nature of statehood in regions where institutional structures and governance mechanisms intersect with diverse actor interests, including personal wealth accumulation, enhancing personal and private networks and projecting legitimacy (Kinossian, 2012; Hagmann and Péclard, 2010).

African studies has a rich literature on the nature of state power and state actors' interests (Fourchard, 2024); and Eastern European scholars have grappled with interpreting the transitional forms of statehood after the demise of socialism (O'Dwyer, 2006; Ion, 2014). Both colonial and socialist eras have shaped current state formations, and both contexts share experiences of rapid political transitions (Pienaar, 1995; O'Dwyer, 2004). This provides a strong basis for initiating "comparative conversations" - posing questions from each context to influence interpretations of the other (Ward, 2010).

In the Benin seminar we will focus on tracing connections across contexts as a basis for initiating comparative conversations (Robinson, 2022, Chapters 5 and 6). Whether exploring direct links between African contexts and Eastern Europe (e.g. Cibian, 2017; Pillay Gonzalez, 2024) or considering how wider connections and flows are bringing African urban experiences into engagement with other regional contexts (Soderstrom, 2014; Dobler and Kesselring, 2019; de Boeck, 2011) and showing the opportunities for comparative reflection.

We hope that bringing two contexts, each on the peripheries of urban studies and the global political economy into closer dialogue (Stanek, 2022; Tuvikene et al., 2017), will not only reinforce the call to learn from 'ordinary' or 'overlooked' cities and regions (Ruszczyk et al., 2020) but focus attention on specific themes and theoretical debates which remain neglected in urban studies, and inspire methodological innovation to support a more global perspective on key themes in urban studies.

Themes

We welcome presentations that open up discussion about seeing **"Africa through connections: learning from elsewhere, theorising from Africa"**. Connections involving private sector investment in infrastructure and urban development; ODA and multilateral as well as sovereign government financing of urban developments; strategies to secure international financial investment in infrastructure; circulating urban and development policies (eg on climate change, localising SDGs etc); policies for trade and diplomatic collaboration; military support and technical exchanges; transnational initiatives involving precarious, informal, illegal or popular practices and investments transforming urban areas. Other relevant themes are also welcome.

Apply to attend

Formal papers as well as early-stage ideas, PhD proposals, or draft research results are all more than welcome. A specific one-day early career research (ECR) day workshop will be held after the formal academic event, at which support for early career and graduate students projects involving tracing connections and comparative analysis will be offered. Please indicate clearly in your application if you would like your proposal to be considered for this ECR workshop.

We encourage those interested in questions of states, urban governance, comparative or cross-regional urban politics, African, and Eastern European studies to attend.

Please send your abstract (max. 250 words) to Emmanuel Awohouedji e.c.awohouedji@lse.ac.uk, with USF COTONOU BENIN in the email's subject by December 31st 2025.

Selected References [key references can be found at this link)

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