

Waste, space and mobility justice: interconnecting strands of the climate crisis as experienced in Dakar, Senegal

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Abstract

Dakar, as described by Senegalese scholar Felwine Sarr, is a city that has ‘lost its lungs’. A city that is experiencing rapid and unplanned urbanisation, a city whose fragility against the climate crisis is manifested in the form of coastal erosion, sea level rise and changing maritime currents. Rapid urbanisation is also leading to and exacerbating waste problems, polluting and suffocating local ecosystems. Here, the mingling of multi-scalar socio-political and environmental abandonments that create a hostile environment are evident. Using Mbembe’s concept of the universal right to breathe as a means to explore the climate crisis, we take the city of Dakar to draw attention to the interconnecting strands that underpin the unequal impacts of this crisis: the right to mobility, the right to live in a healthy environment, and the unequal access to such rights across the globe. Particularly, we focus on its impact on the right to breathe.

‘a city in movement that is constantly in the midst of creating itself. Almost suffocating, it seemingly has lost its lungs despite its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, and green spaces are very rare.’

Felwine Sarr (2019)

“the sand on the beach was alive and used to groan when we walked on it. Now it is not like this. The sand is dead because there is so much rubbish, pollution and waste water that is dumped in the bay that it is now dead”

Abdoulaye Diouf, Thiaroye sul mer, Dakar, Senegal

The Senegalese capital, Dakar, is described as a city that has ‘lost its lungs’, where the sand, suffocated under the rubbish strewn over it, is ‘now dead’. The concept of breath is central to Achille Mbembe (2020), who calls for the universal right to breathe, meaning not just biological breathing, but full enjoyment of the human experience. Using this concept as a means to explore the climate crisis, we take the city of Dakar to draw attention to the interconnecting nexuses of the capitalist extractive economy which feed into the climate crisis and its unequal impacts globally. Particularly, its impact on the right to breathe. The article is based upon research conducted for the interdisciplinary EU funded research project *ClimateOfChange*.

To 'de-naturalise' the climate crisis, often portrayed as natural disasters which invisibilises both the socio-political responsibilities and the global inequalities at the heart of the crisis, the research draws on sociologist Mimi Sheller's concept of 'mobility justice' (2018). This expands the notion of climate justice, broadening our understanding to include climate change, unsustainable urbanisation and unsustainable bordering systems as a combined crisis. The concept reflects the interconnecting strands that emerge from *ClimateOfChange*: the right to mobility, the right to live in a healthy environment, and the unequal access to such rights across the globe (see: Giacomelli, Magnani, Musarò and Walker, 2021). This approach positions capitalism together with its fossil-fuelled infrastructures of air travel, automobility, suburbanisation and consumerism, at the very centre of the climate crisis and displacement (Sheller, 2018; Baldwin et al., 2019). It further recognises the impact of colonialism on both mobilities and places, and that adaptive capacity is highly uneven, mediated by intersectional considerations, such as one's position in relation to capital, gender, ethnicity, class, race (Boas et al., 2019).

Senegal has a high incidence of climate-sensitive economic activities, including farming and fishing. Climate sensitivity is exacerbated by the fact that about 52% of the Senegalese population live in coastal areas, mostly concentrated around Dakar and other urban areas. Senegal's coastal areas are highly environmentally fragile and face sea level rise, coastal erosion, soil salinization, pollution, maritime storms and depletion of fish stocks and biodiversity. Rapid urbanisation is also leading to and exacerbating waste problems. Waste management is both a behavioural and structural issue. Most of the waste is household waste and people lack waste infrastructures, but management also requires a top down approach (Hutson, 2021).

Large cities like Dakar lack professional sanitary disposal sites and almost 70% of the solid waste is deposited in unauthorized waste disposal sites. The nearby Mbeubeuss landfill has dramatically expanded in recent years, and at over 114 hectares is one of the largest open-air landfills in the world. The landfill site was created in 1968 on a drying lake and sits on a flood plain outside Dakar, close to the sea. Now, 1,300 tons of waste is brought in each day by 230 trucks. Not by chance, Mbeubeuss is situated in the Pikine district of Dakar, the poorest suburb of the city (Cissé, 2012) originally established in 1952 when squatters were removed from central Dakar, it has continued to grow due to urban expansion and rural exodus (Simone, 2003). Flooding in this neighbourhood is also a persistent problem. Such places reveal the spatial inequalities inherent in who produces waste and who gets it (Armiero and De Angelis, 2017).

Waste, predominantly plastic, but also clothing and other materials, is visible everywhere, except the tourist beaches, clear from this detritus. The difference between the beaches of Dakar where local people live and the tourist beaches is stark. Tourist beaches reflect the image of the perfect white sand beach, sparkling in the sunlight. The differences between these two beaches becomes a visible metaphor for the inequalities between tourists, privileged travellers of the world, and the local inhabitants who, owing to their marginalised position within structures of racial capitalism that underpin the global economy, are unable to access such freedom of movement.

This reflects Bauman's notion, expressed some years ago now, that 'the vagabonds are the waste of the world which has dedicated itself to tourist services' (1998, p. 92). Local people at risk of being wasted by capitalist processes are held to living in spaces contaminated by growing levels of waste (see also Kerber and Kramm, 2021). Mbembe (2012) too, in relation to the dispossession of life in Africa, maintains that '[capitalism] needs to work through and across different scales of race as it attempts to mark people either as disposable or as waste. It needs to produce, order, segment, and racialize surplus or superfluous populations to strategic effect.'

Both the extent to which certain kinds of people are inundated with pollutants, bacteria, viruses, violence, and disaster and the means by which urbanization as a planetary phenomenon has refigured geographies of sustenance are well documented (Simone, 2016, p. 138). Indeed, as Simone states '[h]undreds of research projects have demonstrated correlations between health, mortality, environmental conditions, economic poverty, spatial exclusion, racial identity, and political justice' (Simone, 2016, p. 138). However, it is important, Simone cautions, to consider how much such indices of deprivation and violence normalize as uninhabitable the places where many people attempt to make a life and fail to account for the 'material residues of countless efforts to endure' (Ibid). It is these efforts to endure against the climate crisis that, in addition to the interconnectivity exposed by the concept of mobility justice, are the focus of this article.

The landfill Mbeubeuss is almost a city in itself. Here, amongst the waste are small shacks where women prepare coffee for the more than 2000 people who work here as waste pickers (Urselli, 2016). People such as Aliou, that left the rural areas of Senegal to come to Dakar in search of work. Aliou previously worked as a receptionist, but his salary was not enough to cover living costs. He then moved to the landfill site, where he could make more money. He has now worked in Mbeubeuss for over thirteen years, moving up the waste picker career ladder, a hierarchical structure based on the capability to identify and strength to pick the more valuable items of waste (Ibid). He is one of the

founders of the informal association *Bokk Djom* (group solidarity and courage) which protects the interests of the waste pickers on site.

Despite the difficulties of having such a highly stigmatized job, Aliou chose this work, which he considers to be: *“an essential job that should be recognised by society, and rendered more secure and protected.”* For Aliou, waste is representative of a society that produces and consumes more than it needs. Of course, the permanent disposal of commodities is an essential part of the planned obsolescence that facilitates continual demand for the new and is central to the production of capitalist value (Rogers, 2005 in Samson, 2015, p. 817).¹ To visit a landfill site is, in the words of the author Guido Viale, to go ‘behind the mirror that the consumer society loves to reflect itself in’ (2000, p. 7). This same mirror hides this world from Europeans. Indeed, many EU Member States continue to send their waste to the Global South, including countries such as Senegal, which are unable to manage their own waste (Hutson, 2021).

Abdoulaye Diouf, an environmentalist who works on awareness raising around waste management, is one of the founders of the *Doleel Thiaroye Sur Mer* (Strengthening Thiaroye Sur Mer) association. He explains how they set up a waste management system whereby rubbish bins were placed in locals’ houses *‘because it requires personal engagement’* and collected once every two days. However, he explains the social issue that emerges as participants are expected to make a monthly contribution to cover rubbish collectors salaries.

“This requires a behaviour change because for 50 years some people have been dumping their rubbish in the sea, so they find it illogical to pay for collection. Normally, the municipality should be in charge of rubbish collection, but it fails to do this. People should step up to avoid polluting the sea, as this leads to the scarcity of fish that then impacts the whole of society since people will not be able to make a livelihood.”

In Rufisque, another fishing area of Dakar, locals have transformed a former open landfill into a community ecological centre, encouraging recycling and rubbish collection. This is *“to reduce the impact due to the trash methanization and to reduce the sea pollution caused by rubbish disposal in the sea.”*

¹ See also discussion of waste in this journal *losquaderno* n.29 (2013) <http://www.losquaderno.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/losquaderno29.pdf>

Abdoulaye Diouf explains the impact of sea pollution further:

“As you can see, the beach is full of rubbish, which chases the fish because they are unable to breath. If the fish are unable to live in an appropriate environment, at the right temperature, they will move elsewhere. The fishermen then have to work harder to reach the fish that move to places that are the domain of the big boats. That is the problem.”

The bigger boats are industrial boats from the EU, Russia and China. This is a form of ‘ocean grabbing’, which mainly takes place through policies, laws, and practices that are (re) define and (re)allocate access, use and control of fisheries resources away from small-scale fishers and their communities, often with little concern for the adverse environmental consequences. Indeed, the EU has been strongly criticised for its role in the depletion of West African fish stocks (Okafor-Yarwood and Belhabib, 2020).

It is these intertwined factors that led many people to maintain that often there was ‘no choice’ to stay in Senegal, even if that may be the preferred option. *“No choice”* was a recurrent and dominant theme that emerged in the discussion of motivations leading people to take the risky pirogue (small wooden fishing boats) journey across the Atlantic to the Canary Islands/Europe.² This illegalised journey is seen as a life and death challenge as other, legal, routes are not possible (Ifekwunigwe, 2013). The motto for this journey is: ‘Barca wala barsakh’ - ‘either we get to Barcelona or we die trying’. Literally, Barcelona or the hereafter. There was a fatalistic recognition of the limited options available in fishing communities such as Rufisque or Thiaroye-sur-mer, where sea level rise is causing land to disappear and people to be displaced, and the fishing industry is being destroyed by pollution, currents changing due to climate change, leading fish to migrate elsewhere, and industrial fishing boats taking the larger, more expensive fish.

Concluding thoughts

‘Climate-induced migration’ is now a common rationale for measures to strengthen and protect national and regional borders in the Global North (Boas et al. 2019). Resources going towards border enforcement compared with resources going into climate mitigation are significantly higher. Broadening the concept of climate justice to mobility justice (Sheller, 2018) reveals how the climate crisis includes a broadened set of civil rights issues, with far-reaching implications beyond the environmental, directly understood. Evidence from Dakar reveals the mingling of multi-scalar socio-

² Between January and June 2021 at least 250 migrants lost their lives crossing the Atlantic. See: <https://migration.iom.int/reports/west-and-central-africa-%e2%80%94-irregular-migration-routes-europe-%e2%80%94-western-african-atlantic-0>

political and environmental abandonments that create a hostile environment. In *Afrotopia*, Felwine Sarr (2019) calls for a move away from fossil fuels to an acuter environmental awareness and responsible modes of production in Africa, and, importantly, to draw upon diverse epistemologies, away from Eurocentric extractivist modes of production. It is essential then to align with Achille Mbembe's (2020) call for the universal right to breathe. This is embedded in the right to a healthy environment for all in the widest sense where sand, fish, people, and the city itself are all able to breathe.

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