Across the vernacular-theoretical divide: cultures of urban comparison from Naples to Africa and back again

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1. «Naples is the Lagos of Europe»

At the end of the 1990s I embarked on an ethnographic study of the lives of international migrants working and residing in and around Piazza Garibaldi, the giant esplanade in front of Naples' central railway station, as part of a broader project that examined the impact of urban regeneration in the southern Italian city (Dines 2012). I was especially interested to explore how different people made sense of a place that had become a source of anxiety for the local centre-left administration and media that were both intent on imagining the piazza as the portal to a resurgent historic centre. According to the city's self-appointed sentinels, the somewhat shabby appearance of the area, coupled with its traffic-cluttered streets, informal economies and, above all, the disorderly throngs of (non-tourist) foreigners offered «*una brutta immagine per la città*».

Most of the people I got to know during the fieldwork appeared to make light of the public furore surrounding Piazza Garibaldi. This was not the rundown antechamber to a world heritage site but the economic and social nerve centre of Naples. Indeed, for some who travelled in on buses and trains from outlying towns, Piazza Garibaldi *was* Naples. Polish and Ukrainian domestic workers compared favourably its Sunday morning hullabaloo with the drudgery and isolation of their workplaces in middle-class suburbs. Meanwhile, for others who had been wooed by local suitors, the piazza had lost its convivial charm: nevertheless, it continued to serve as a convenient rendezvous before they headed out on day trips to the Sorrento peninsula.

For the migrants who frequented it, Piazza Garibaldi functioned as a cardinal point for navigating their relationships with Naples, the surrounding region and further afield. The piazza was also sized up against people's prior knowledge of other cities. One young male migrant from Benin who had recently arrived in Italy and was staying with friends in the station area but who planned to eventually move to France had already arrived at the conclusion that Naples was «the Lagos of Europe». As he explained, he found the clamour of Piazza Garibaldi to be both seductive and intimidating, which reminded him of the sensation he felt every time he visited the Nigerian megalopolis, 120 kilometres along the coast from his native Cotonou.

Comparing Naples with Lagos would normally incite the wrath of some Neapolitans. Visitors have long drawn parallels between Naples and cities, countries and entire continents located outside Europe. During the Risorgimento, for example, the association between Naples and

Africa was often evoked to advance the idea of the city as an obstacle to national progress. When I moved to the city in the mid-1990s – amidst the fanfare and scepticism surrounding the so-called Neapolitan Renaissance – I soon discovered that certain sections of the bourgeoisie and the mainstream Left were hypersensitive to unwarranted juxtapositions with anywhere off the 'civilized' world map that might tarnish the carefully rehabilitated image of Naples and they regularly pilloried the errant and illicit acts of fellow residents designated to possess inferior levels of cultural and moral capital for enabling such comparisons to be made. Antonio Bassolino, the city's mayor at the time, censured what he considered a masochistic attachment to the unregenerate Naples of yesteryear, something he termed «the ideology of ugliness» (Bassolino 1996, p. 56). Back in 1980, as a leading left-wing figure in the Italian Communist Party, Bassolino had similarly railed against the «old», «simplistic» and «reactionary» analogy between Naples and Calcutta that had been rejected by the PCI's commitment to strive for a modern, productive city (Bassolino 1980, p. 24). The fact that the recurrent association between Naples and non-Western cities has been construed as a slur on the city's backwardness says probably more about the Euro-supremacist worldview of those offended than it does about actual anti-Neapolitan prejudice. But it is also clear that the urge to contrast Naples with elsewhere is just as much an internal preoccupation as it is the vocation of outsiders.

Fast-forward forty years and urban comparisons continue to be the subject of public altercations in the city. In early May 2018, following a number of assaults on ambulance crew, the president of the local doctors' association declared to the press that «Naples was like Raqqa» (Cuozzo 2018). In doing so, he resurrected a longstanding trope of equating southern Italian cities with conflict zones in the Middle East (with Palermo famously dubbed Beirut during the Mafia War of the early 1980s). Naples' current mayor, Luigi de Magistris, was swift to voice his outrage: not only was the correlation insensitive to the war-ravaged Syrian city but it was also an unacceptable insult to the reputation of Naples and its emergency services. In fact, the mayor declared that numerous complaints had been registered on the "Defend the City" website, which the council had recently set up to protect Naples from public slander and – presumably – inappropriate comparisons. Soon after, the centre-left president of the Campania region and self-styled champion of law and order, Vincenzo De Luca, entered the fray with his own geographical take on affairs. Recounting a short walk he had taken across Piazza Garibaldi a few days earlier, De Luca claimed that «the place looked like Calcutta, Bangladesh» (ANSA 2018). The South Asia connection served to turn the volume of the bellicose rhetoric down to a more mundane level, and by perching the city on the edge of a third-world precipice, De Luca was able to take a swipe at his arch rival in city hall: «if it weren't for the regional government, Naples would plunge to the bottom» (ibid.).

We cannot know for sure whether De Luca's evocation of Calcutta and Bangladesh was an allusion to the station area's physical appearance or to the presence of numerous brown faces, although, considering his public actions and statements in the past, it was probably both. Whatever the case, behind the apparent indifference to the questionable implications of such a comparison, De Luca had resorted to the familiar ploy of relocating Naples outside Europe in order to communicate the political issues at stake. But, in that same fleeting moment, he also reiterated the establishment's underlying angst about the city's place in the world, as well as the enduring blind spots about race and colonialism among much of the institutional Left. The Beninese migrant's impression of Naples as the «Lagos of Europe» thus represents, to a certain extent, the return of the comparative gaze. The superimposition of an African urban world onto Naples is not a gibe at the latter's putative lack of civilizational moorings but a means to articulate the young man's equivocal response to arrival in a foreign city. Indeed, unlike others, he does not hesitate to situate Naples *in* Europe, and in doing so starts to dislodge the certitude underpinning the geographical hubris of people like De Luca.

People have always compared cities, whether their own or those of others, cities they have first-hand experience of or places they have never visited. As the urban geographer Colin McFarlane writes «when we make a claim about «the city» […], the claim is implicitly – and crucially, inevitably – to some extent a comparative claim, because our claims and arguments are always set against other kinds of urban possibilities or imaginaries» (2010 pp.725-26). The urge to compare cities has grown during the contemporary era with the intensification of globalization, increased travel opportunities and greater access to urban knowledge through the internet. During two decades of urban ethnographic research, I have increasingly found myself mulling over the significance of people's urban comparisons such as those outlined above. Here I want to draw on this work in order to raise and begin to address some rudimentary questions that hopefully can trigger further discussion.

A salutary starting point is to ask: what's the point? Why pay attention to the common habit of comparing cities? What are such comparisons supposed to tell us and how can they enhance our understanding of urban life? Are not the ways in which people contrast and connect cities simply too arbitrary, infinite and ephemeral? At most they may complement the analysis of more substantive issues, but ultimately are they not too elusive to warrant sustained scrutiny? Or might it not be more fitting to view some urban comparisons as «performative speech acts» (Austin 1962)? In other words, they do not simply describe constative differences and similarities but are an active intervention into the meaning of the urban realities described. If we are in a position to identify and decode such utterances, might they not contribute insights into how people understand and articulate the interconnections between cities and the politics of place?

In response to these questions, I must confess to vacillating at times between the conviction that comparisons offer extraordinary clues about the workings of urban knowledge and a lingering sense that they are too capricious to be consequential. Nevertheless, and as I hope to have already demonstrated, my research in Naples has taught me to take people's comparisons seriously and to be alert to the patterns and broader frameworks that emerge from them. The various structures that bring two or more cities and their connected spaces into everyday comparative relief constitute what I want to tentatively call «cultures of urban comparison». Although cities can be potentially compared with anywhere, people tend to draw upon and manipulate a range of pre-existing, locally-embedded repertoires and imaginaries that position a city in relation to the wider world, that, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, «communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward [urban] life» (Geertz p.89).

There are also pressing questions of a more methodological order. If comparisons are worthy of attention, how does one go about studying them? And how might we reconcile a concern for other people's comparisons with the fact that it is us – urban researchers – who ultimately pull the strings? Certainly, it makes little sense to gather information through surveys and questionnaires, even if we include ostensibly open-ended questions like "what cities do you draw into comparison and why?", because such approaches would be unable to account for the crucial contextual dimension in which comparisons are made. A serious appreciation of their relevance and meaning is by necessity a gradual, inductive process: comparisons often arise in unexpected circumstances and it is only over time and through their reiteration in public or more intimate settings that their arrangements start to take shape and become meaningful. It is for this reason that urban ethnography, with its methodological commitment to establishing a protracted, in-depth and reflexive relationship with the field, is best suited to trace out and make sense of people's urban comparisons. But even as one sets out to do work in an unfamiliar city, emergent comparative practices can act as signposts that inform research questions and help steer the direction of inquiry. I want to demonstrate the differing degrees to which people's urban comparisons can influence urban research by reflecting both on my longstanding work on Naples and on a current comparative project on two African cities, Rabat and Cape Town.

2. The renewed interest in comparative urbanism in global urban studies

Research on cities across the social sciences has long had a comparative bent, dating back at least to the work on central African Copperbelt cities conducted by the Manchester school anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century (Robinson 2006). The escalation of globalization saw a revival of comparative urban research in the 1980s and 1990s. As Jane M. Jacobs has noted: «bringing cities

together was not simply a scientific method, it was an empirical fact – cities were connecting in ways not previously observed» (2012, p.909).

The last decade has seen a resurgence in debates about comparative urbanism, especially in the field of human geography and often from a postcolonial perspective (see for example, Robinson 2006, 2011, 2016; McFarlane 2008, 2010; Ward 2010; Jacobs 2012). A common premise for most contributors to this debate is the need to move away from conventional controlled comparisons with their heavy focus on Western canonical themes (such as deindustrialization) in mainly North American and Western European cities towards more open and relational approaches that are potentially able to bring all cities into view. The goal is to dethrone privileged sites and paradigmatic cities that have traditionally dominated the production of urban knowledge and to advance an agenda for a truly global and cosmopolitan urban studies.

Much of this rich and timely, albeit largely Anglophone, debate grapples with the relationship between comparative research and the reconstitution of urban theory. Broad support is expressed for more creative and/or ethnographically-informed approaches that address the power relations implicated in comparative studies and that engage with elementary but fundamental questions such as «who gets to speak for a city?» (Jacobs 2012, p.910) and «what «communities» do we write for?» (McFarlane 2010, p.737). Despite such concerns, one dimension that has largely been missing from this debate is precisely the everyday social practice of comparing cities. Commentators typically note the current vogue for urban comparison beyond academia, from pseudo-scientific city rankings to interactive digital platforms such as UN-Habitat's «Compare Cities». Overall, however, there is little interest to bring into discussion non-expert comparative gestures and their attendant urban knowledges, and when attention does turn to ««real world» environments» (Ward 2009, p.472), this rarely moves beyond «the imaginations of policy-makers, politicians and practitioners» (ibid.).

There are moments where the debate gets tantalizingly close to accounting for this general lacuna. In her special issue commentary entitled «Comparing comparative urbanisms», Jane M. Jacobs writes: «Thinking across unexpected geographies of comparison – the kinds of existing comparisons that city builders, managers, transnational workers, and residents engage in – is essential for redrawing the map of urban studies» (Jacobs 2012, p.910). Frustratingly, this point is not developed and instead, like others, Jacobs proceeds to focus her discussion on the «parameters and logics» (ibid.) of inter-urban policy agendas. Meanwhile, the anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller, opens her essay in the same special issue with a look at how West African migrants in Halle, Germany rank the relative merits and disadvantages of living in different cities across the world. These migrants do not assess cities as distinct places but as part of a «transnational social

field» that reflects their own transnational and interpersonal relations (Glick Schiller 2012, p. 879). However, this discussion is not deepened but rather operates as a vignette to introduce the main body of Glick Schiller's paper that analyses how the relative positions of three cities – Paris, Dallas and Halle – are shaped by their relationships to international migration. In the instances where compelling but brief engagements abruptly retreat without any further reflection, I am left with the impression that the task of comparison ultimately lies in the hands of the scholar. In other words, while the comparative urbanism debate has been immensely important in pushing the geographical and conceptual boundaries of urban studies, there is a hint of solipsism when it comes to the actual act of comparing: thanks, but no thanks, we'll do it ourselves.

One might assume that this disregard is due to the fact the principal exponents of comparative urbanism have been geographers who generally are more theoretically oriented and less inclined to digressions of an ethnographic or everyday nature. It must be said, nonetheless, that the situation is not markedly different in anthropology. Besides the fact there has been far less specific reflection on cities, anthropologists' own engagements with comparative practices (e.g. Gingrich and Fox 2002) largely treat these as the methodological prerogative of ethnographers rather than an active pursuit of their informants. Social psychology is the one discipline to seriously investigate the way people make comparisons. Here the focus is on the processes by which individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities in relation to other people, and considers a range of issues regarding how and why people make comparisons, who makes them and their subsequent effects (Gerber 2018). The city, however, is not an extension of the self, and while people may profess pride, affection or disdain for one particular city and their feelings about urban places may respond in part to the presence of others, the act of comparing cities clearly cannot be reduced to a set of psychological variables. Nevertheless, the very existence of something called «social comparison theory» for more than half a century suggests, at the very least, there is scope for tackling vernacular urban comparisons in a more systematic way, rather than just treating them as a curious sideshow.

3. Cultures of urban comparison from Naples to Africa

«Visitors tell us that Naples reminds them of Bombay or Cairo, and we want to remind them that we are Europeans and secretly wish someone would mistake Naples for Stockholm or Bern» (Astarita 2005, p.7)

I decided to commence my monograph *Tuff City* (Dines 2012) with the above comment by the US-based Neapolitan historian, Tommaso Astarita not because of any immediate interest in comparative urbanism (a theme that is not developed in the book), but because I felt it effectively

captured the schizophrenic way in which many intellectuals and public figures at the turn of the millennium were trying to craft an unwieldy ideological narrative about Naples' rightful place in the world. The contradistinction between the real and imagined urban realities of northern and central Europe and an unspeakable 'third world' was repeatedly summoned in the many conversations I was having with members of the local middle classes and it pointed to a common culturally-ingrained, class-inflected repertoire that aspired to define the problems at stake in Naples at a time of marked political and social rupture.

Thanks to the countless encounters with different people over the last two decades of living and working in Naples, I have come to appreciate the sociological and political relevance of comparisons. The cities that people select to bring into comparative relief, the historical and situational circumstances under which these comparisons are made and the social structures that mould them provide a key to understanding the formation of geographical knowledges and how these get mobilized for calculated ends.

Not all Neapolitans are prone to compare their city with Stockholm, or any other northern European city for that matter, and those who do, do so for divergent reasons. Thus, while in the eyes of the Neapolitan middle class, Stockholm is a paragon of «civicness», where everything works and people respect the common good, for the numerous elderly inhabitants in the low-income popular neighbourhoods who, as former *magliari* (itinerant hawkers of poor-quality fabrics), had plied their trade across northern Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, such cities are remembered as places of toil and isolation, offset by their own national support networks and self-organized forms of entertainment. These ex-*magliari* acknowledge the cities' celebrated urban civility but only insofar as a foil to the lack of conviviality in everyday life, and it is by «not becoming like those places» that they defend their urban livelihoods and resist unwarranted external interference. Moreover, the idea of a «civic Stockholm» has not always existed in Naples or Italy. During the 1960s, Sweden was commonly associated with social and sexual promiscuity – captured by the box-office success of Luigi Scattini's 1968 mondo movie *Svezia Inferno e Paradiso* – and its capital certainly did not offer Naples an absolute moral or political compass. In fact, Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, who was parachuted into Naples from Paris as a PCI candidate in the 1968 parliamentary elections, recounts that comrades accused her of «writ[ing] about Naples as if it were Sweden» (Macciocchi 1973, p.177). The recent esteem for a place like Stockholm is not simply a response to exogenous factors, such as a predilection for Scandinavian social democracy. Rather, it dovetails with the emergence of public discourses in Naples about urban citizenship since the 1980s and their subsequent integration into areas of local policy.

Other common cultures of urban comparison simultaneously exist in Naples. There is a national equivalent to Stockholm and Bern that pits Naples against northern Italian cities, a southward comparative gaze that is not limited to the racist quips of someone like Vincenzo De Luca but includes a counter-discourse about the city's place in the Mediterranean, and there are the destinations of transatlantic emigration that are wrapped up in family histories and implicated in the delayed construction of a maritime museum in the city's port, to name just three examples. And, as we have already seen, there are the multiple repertoires of international migrants where Naples becomes but one node in a web of transnational networks. The capacity to recognize and make sense of comparative cultures – to trace out their evolution and internal friction and to appreciate their shifts in meaning across social groups – is a skill and a sensibility that accrues over time but one that is never translatable into definitive, measurable knowledge (e.g. «Naples is compared with X because…»), precisely due to the mercurial nature of the comparative outlook on urban life. Perhaps this is one reason why there has been little apparent concern to consider this sociocultural practice in a more systematic way.

In any case, there was no such acquaintance with the local cultures of comparison when I recently commenced work on Rabat and Cape Town. This research was part of a project that proposed to examine the relationship between the global aspirations of state and elite actors and cultural diversity politics in 'Global South' cities in Asia and Africa. In other words, it set out with an explicitly comparative focus. My selection of cities for the project was determined in some measure by practicalities: I had friends in Rabat and it was relatively quick and cheap to reach, while Cape Town was Anglophone and well covered in the urban studies literature. In part it was also influenced by my limited prior knowledge: Rabat was the lacklustre political capital overshadowed by its close neighbour Casablanca and the historical cities of Marrakech and Fez, but also famous for its French colonial layout and was currently undergoing major development; Cape Town was the only majority «Coloured» city in the post-Apartheid nation and was cut across by deep economic and racial inequalities but it was also a popular international tourist destination and possessed a globally-oriented policy agenda. As far as I could work out, Rabat and Cape Town had not been directly compared before but, as contemporary comparative urbanists insist, this should be an incentive and not a dissuasion.

Some of the frameworks in which the two cities get conventionally represented and compared – Rabat as a MENA (Middle East and North Africa) capital and Cape Town as a second-tier global city – appeared to be confirmed by the literature and my early impressions during visits. For instance, the Bouregreg Valley project in Rabat, which includes the usual fare of marinas, luxury flats and cultural amenities along the city's river corridor, has been promoted by Morocco's

print media as providing infrastructure that allows the national capital to compete with regional (i.e. MENA) rivals such as Tunis, Beirut and even Dubai for international business, high-end tourism and inward investment (Bogaert 2018, p. 52, 247).

As I progressed with fieldwork, the 'aspiring global city' dimension was reframed by the realization that certain local actors were also sizing Rabat and Cape Town up to African cities and the African continent more generally. Until relatively recently, the two cities and their respective countries had been marginal to African affairs: South Africa was considered an international pariah during apartheid, while the post-independence Moroccan state had long hinged its identity on Arab nationalism and the country had left the African Union in dispute over Western Sahara in 1984. Over the last two decades, however, the two nations have increasingly become protagonists in the continent's economic and cultural affairs as they both have moved back into the fold of African international relations (with apartheid formally ending in 1994 and Morocco finally rejoining the African Union in 2017 after lengthy diplomatic efforts by King Mohammed VI).

Thus, in the case of Rabat, even if still rarely considered an «African city» in academic circles, the situation on the ground is changing. Alongside the emerging plethora of Africa-themed festivals, Africa-oriented government agencies and sub-Saharan migrant associations, in late 2018 construction began on the Mohammed VI Tower, publicly billed as the tallest skyscraper *in Africa* (and not in the Arab world), and so Rabat's official counterparts are Johannesburg (which currently hosts the tallest liveable structure on the continent), Nairobi and Casablanca (each of which has embarked on a similar project). Although cultural elites are comfortable to draw parallels between, say, Rabat's new Biennale and the long-established DaKart in Senegal's capital, many local people, indifferent to the vagaries of cultural policy, tend not to view Rabat or Morocco as part of Africa. As Laura Menin has written (2016, p. 3), the Arabic term *Afriqiy* for «African» is generally used to designate sub-Saharan Africans. Moreover, the Moroccan state's celebration of Africa barely tackles the country's own history of slavery and racism towards black Africans. Meanwhile, some journalists and civil society activists that I have encountered are somewhat cynical about the proliferation of neo-Tifinagh script on Rabat's public buildings as part of the official recognition of indigenous Amazigh (Berber) culture: this is not seen as a substantive move towards a more plural city but rather a ceremonial gimmick on the part of the state to render Rabat more «African» and not exclusively «Arabic» as it seeks to develop its interests on the continent.

Like Rabat, Cape Town is situated on the edge of Africa. Across its history, Whites in particular have aspired to craft an exclusive sense of place identity on account of the city's relative isolation. Since 1994, Cape Town has acquired a global reputation for its array of post-Apartheid heritage sites such as Robben Island and the District Six Museum that speak to a dark national (and

not just local) past. In the last few years, the city has also seen the opening of major new, privately-funded cultural institutions, such as Zeitz MOCAA and the Norval Foundation, that have no direct interest in the memory of apartheid but are geared to grooming Cape Town as a global capital of contemporary African art. Inaugurated in late 2017, Zeitz MOCCAA was publicly hailed as the largest museum to be opened in an African city since the Cairo museum in 1902. Similar to the case of Rabat's Mohammed VI Tower, urban competition has taken on trans-African proportions. At the same time, with an increase in internal migration of Xhosa speakers from the Eastern Cape and international migration from countries such as Zimbabwe and DCR, the population and streetscape of the formerly whites-only Central Business District has become markedly more African. Numerous shop signs, advertising hoardings and street stalls invoke other African countries, cities and languages through words, photographs, maps and flags. According to Ntone Edjabe, Cameroonian writer and local resident who I met in early 2018, these multiple references to Africa are specific to Cape Town, were certainly less pronounced in Johannesburg and reflect, in his opinion, a local obsession to overcome its «European» imprint. This was confirmed during my conversations with East Cape Africans who often insisted on reciting the routine comparison between Cape Town and Johannesburg. According to one man, whenever he travelled to the latter city, his friends would greet him with the words «Welcome to Africa», which both intimated towards a common-held sense that Johannesburg promised greater opportunities and which articulated Cape Town's own deeply uneven spatial politics.

During the course of the research, I have therefore expanded from the initial focus on how the two cities appropriate, remodel and reject global/western discourses about cultural pluralism as part of an extrospective urban agenda to look more closely at how Africa and African cities are themselves becoming a reference for inter-urban comparison and competition. This African comparative dimension – which in Rabat is largely an elite culture – frames the way certain people perceive and critique urban change and has led me to investigate processes of ostensible Africanization in the two cities. As McFarlane argues «comparisons can inspire unexpected ideas and directions, and it is useful to retain a sense that not knowing where a comparison might lead is a legitimate task» (2008, p.16). McFarlane refers here to comparison as a research practice: it is worth noting that unexpected directions can also arise out of the comparative gestures made by others in the field.

4. Everyone's an expert – everyone's an urban comparator?

Paying greater attention to how different people and not only scholars compare cities can, I believe, open up a largely unchartered territory for urban research. It may not seem immediately rewarding:

the urban comparisons that people deploy do not always satisfy the «creative» and «relational» comparative approaches coveted by critical urban geographers. Moreover, comparisons can be clichéd, unimaginative, inaccurate and sometimes downright unpalatable. Jane M. Jacobs, who of all the participants in the recent debate on comparative urbanism, appears the most receptive to the disruptive cacophony of other people's comparisons, concedes: «It is worth noting that in this everyday comparativism, categories that theorists might wish away or to be sceptical of (such as "less developed," "developing," "rural," and "urban," etc.) live on» (2012, p.910).

The reflections presented here only begin to answer the questions raised at the beginning. In the meantime, more contextual questions have arisen. When and why do people compare cities? Who tends to make (more) comparisons? Is it likely to be individuals or groups who are in greater contact with other places? How are cultures of comparison shaped by issues such as age or gender? Can we talk in terms of differing levels of «inter-urban consciousness» that, in turn, waxes and wanes according to the greater or lesser need and desire to compare with elsewhere? Such questions can only ever be partially answered, nevertheless they are worth posing if only to avoid conjecture. But if we as researchers are interested to pursue the possibilities offered by this approach to research, it ultimately means relinquishing our claims to the near total monopoly over comparative urban knowledge.

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