

City identities between the global and the national: reflections from opposite sides of the Mediterranean.

Nick Dines, European University Institute

According to a well-rehearsed argument, contemporary cities are key drivers of the global economy. They function as nodes in the transnational flow of goods, capital, people, ideas, policies and technologies. By circumventing the national level, it is claimed, cities are also becoming more than ever the sites where cosmopolitan ideals are incubated and nourished and where encounters with cultural diversity are part of everyday urban experience. At the same time, a range of downsides are routinely listed, first and foremost the surging inequalities in income levels and housing conditions that exist within the same cities. Nevertheless, and despite the recrudescence of reactionary nationalist politics across much of the world, the city continues to be imagined and lived as a laboratory for building a palpable sense of 'global identity'. For this idea to have any analytical purchase, we need to appreciate how such an identity is forged in relation to local and national circumstances, and the extent to which different people are implicated (or not) in its production.

Much of the scholarly and media attention on global cities has focused on a select number of cities. For example, Saskia Sassen's pioneering study concentrated on London, New York and Tokyo.¹ More recent scholarship has expanded the focus to consider emerging global centres located outside the world's leading nations, such as Singapore or Dubai.² Others have argued that the economic indicators used to rank global cities work to leave most of the world's cities out of the picture, and have instead highlighted how all urban areas are tied into a range of transnational economic, political and cultural networks that are not reducible to high-end financial or service sectors.³

The cities of Rome and Rabat provide interesting entry points to thinking about the wider relationship between globalization and cities that move us beyond well-trodden cases like London or New York. They are two cities that I know well: Rome is where I have lived for more than a decade; Rabat is where I have been conducting fieldwork during the last year. Despite their relative proximity (they are connected by a three-hour flight operating twice a week), the two cities sit on opposite sides of the Mediterranean Sea – historically a space of interconnection but one that has increasingly become of late a deadly border between the developed 'Global North' and the developing 'Global South'.

Rome and Rabat are rarely categorized as global cities in the conventional sense, unlike their national rivals and economic counterparts, Milan and Casablanca. Instead, they are political and administrative centres: two capital cities with a limited history of industrialization and a negligible presence of multinational firms. Certainly at a symbolic and geopolitical level, Rome possesses considerable international prestige as one of the one of the world's most visited and iconic metropolises, as the former capital of a vast empire and as the centre of the Catholic church, and yet it has long held a peripheral position with respect to ideas about Western urban modernity.⁴ Rabat is smaller and far less illustrious than Rome, and although it

¹ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991.

² Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong, *Worlding City: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2011.

³ Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. London, Routledge, 2006.

⁴ Isabella Clough Marinaro and Bjorn Thomassen, *Global Rome: Changing Faces of the Eternal City*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2013.

has drawn a steady stream of international tourists since the period of the French Protectorate (1912-1956), it has always been accorded a marginal place in imaginaries of Arab, North African and, indeed, Moroccan cities.

Nevertheless, over the last thirty years, a series of global processes have transformed each of the cities, albeit to differing degrees. Here I want to spotlight just two issues. First, each has experienced an increase in international migration – Rome since the 1980s and Rabat during the last decade. Today more than 13% of Rome’s population (around 400,000 people) are of migrant origin, while in Rabat about 10,000 mainly sub-Saharanans have recently joined the more established European communities, reflecting Morocco’s recent evolution from a country of emigration and transit migration to one also of immigration. Neither city follows the archetypal global city script: foreigners do not occupy positions at the top or bottom ends of the transnational corporate economy, but rather work, in the case of Western European and North American migrants, for international government agencies and NGOs, or else are employed in the domestic and local service sectors and sometimes in informal activities such as street trading. Moreover, the intensification of urban cultural diversity has yet to be mobilized positively in the local policy agendas of either city, unlike in London where even the former right-wing mayor Boris Johnson shouted the praises of diversity as a means to parade the cities’ global economic prowess.

Second, the cultural economies of Rome and Rabat have recently broadened their scope from a traditional emphasis on heritage tourism (both in fact possess UNESCO world heritage sites) towards developing globally oriented infrastructure with the rationale of reconfiguring the two cities as cutting-edge international cultural hubs. Almost by way of confirmation, each has a flagship cultural institution designed by the late global ‘starchitect’ Zaha Hadid: the National Museum of Twenty-First Century Arts (MAXXI) opened in Rome in 2010, while the Grand Théâtre de Rabat is due to be completed in early 2019 and will become the centrepiece of the city’s Bouregreg Valley Development, the largest urban project in Moroccan history that includes luxury apartments, marinas, a new tramline and plans for Africa’s tallest skyscraper. According to its sponsors, this project aspires to turn the former sleepy backwater into one of the leading cities of the Mediterranean basin.

These global ambitions are entangled with the nation-building projects that continue to play out in each city. Political and business elites in Rome increasingly concur that in order to keep up with both its European and internal competitors and thus safeguard its cultural and national pre-eminence, the Italian capital needs to tap into global cultural circuits, be these through new art spaces such as MAXXI or international events like the Rome Film Festival that have proliferated since the early 2000s. Meanwhile, the Bouregreg Project’s goal of offering global lifestyles goes hand in hand with the imperative of exporting the image of a ‘new Morocco’ to the world: one that is not only a synthesis of modernity and tradition (a mantra since independence in 1956), but is also liberal, open to foreign investment and a bastion of stability in the region.

However, according to local critics, in targeting international and national elites, the facilities and services of the Bouregreg Project have led to spatial segregation in an already socially and economically divided city. Indeed, many residents do not regard the redevelopment of Rabat as an entry point into a more globalized economy but rather see it simply as “another world”.⁵ Not dissimilarly, in Rome as the internationally-connected creative classes have gravitated

⁵ Koenraad Bogaert, *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco*. Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 2018, p.160.

towards popular neighbourhoods outside the city's Aurelian walls, they have brought with them a spectre that haunts urban globalization, that of gentrification and the ensuing hikes in rents and displacement of former residents that follow in its wake.

Thinking about the globalizing identities of cities thus compels us to move beyond the regional fixes of city rankings to consider how all cities grapple with their place in the world. At the same time, as anthropologist James Ferguson has observed,⁶ the global economy does not *flow* across the planet but rather *hops* between enclaves such as fenced-off mines or oil reserves. In doing so it not only misses out entire territories – for instance most of Africa – but it also skips over much of the urban population. This applies just as much to Rome as it does to Rabat.

Nick Dines is an urban sociologist and is currently Jean Monnet Fellow in the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, Fiesole. He is the author of numerous publications on contemporary urban change and international migration, including the monograph *Tuff City: Urban Change and Contested Space in Central Naples* (New York, 2012). Among his present projects, he is developing research on the politics of cultural diversity in Rabat and Cape Town.

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⁶ James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa and the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2006.