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Paradigms Lost in Morocco: How Urban Mega-Projects Should Disturb our Understanding of Arab Politics

by Koenraad Bogaert   Jun 04 2015

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When you enter Casablanca by train along the coastal track, you can see the new high-rises of Casablanca Marina appear in the distance. Although still under construction, it has already radically transformed the skyline of Casablanca. The Mrina project is situated just in front of the old medina between the harbor and the magnificent Hassan II Mosque. The medina, the traditional part of the city, with its robust stone walls, its narrow streets, and its numerous small shops, will be hidden from now on behind a new city-panorama of concrete and glass. A new beachfront reaches out to the Atlantic Ocean, and to the rest of the world. It will consist of yachting marinas, luxury hotels, shops and residences, offices, a conference center, and even a grand aquarium. Launched in 2006 by King Mohamed VI, Casablanca Marina holds out a vision of a "modern" city, a "globalized" city, one tourists can enjoy, and in which businesses can thrive.

[A picture of the Casablanca Marina project under construction (2013), and the slums right across it. Image by author.]

On one of my fieldtrips to Casablanca, in September 2013, I met with Souad, an architect and long-time political activist. Over the past few years, she has been active in the 20 February Movement, the protest movement that emerged in the wake of the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. As we were walking through the old medina towards the Marina project construction site, she explained that the rocky shore in front of the medina used to be a place of encounter. It was a place where people went fishing, and afterwards they would drink tea in one of the medina's cafés. Nowadays, with the privatization of the seashore, these encounters belong to the past. The construction site is now closed off by an iron fence covered with billboards promising a different future. What Souad wanted to turn my attention to was the urban life, the public space, however modest it might have been, which had to yield to the

Casablanca Marina. She wanted to tell me another story, in contrast to that of the urban developers and designers of such mega-projects, who usually do not mention these kinds of encounters. In the developer's view, the Marina occupied a desolate space, or at best a degraded space, in which there was little or no development before, and little or no life. In the past, the developer's story then usually continues, Moroccan cities had turned their back on the Atlantic Ocean, and now the time has come to remedy this historic mistake. Mega-projects such as the Marina are going to put Morocco's cities back on the world map.

Urban mega-projects such as Casablanca Marina are all about the promise of a better world. If the project manages to "bring in" globalization then it will stimulate growth, generate employment, and bring about development. Of course, the urban developer's story is not neutral or apolitical. It represents a particular kind of development, a particular kind of urbanism. The regeneration of Casablanca reflects a hegemonic project, one that very much resembles other urban projects around the globe and fits perfectly within neoliberal strategies of development. This is also what Souad wanted to show me, and she regretted that her fellow activists had missed the importance of these evolutions: "While the 20 February Movement was debating abstract things like democracy, capital took over the city. While we were bickering between leftists and Islamists within the movement, they privatized our public space," she sighed while we looked over the construction site. But what does it mean when capital takes over a city? More specifically, what does it mean with regard to the ways we understand political change, power and agency in a country like Morocco, or in the region more broadly? And, if we relate very particular urban developments to politics more generally, what can this relation do to the dominant paradigms which inform our understanding of political change, democratization and authoritarianism in the region today?

Not only activists but also academics and other intellectuals have been debating democracy, authoritarianism and the more recent role of the 20 February Movement in Moroccan politics. Yet, when it comes to understanding the broader political context in which the social protests emerged, rarely do any of these analyses take into account the rapid and fundamental urban transformations of the last decade. Nevertheless, the politics of mega-projects in Morocco raise important questions that unsettle the ways in which we understand broader issues such as the relationship between globalization and individual countries, or between *global* capitalism and *local* places like Casablanca, and also those issues related to democratization and authoritarianism. The project of Casablanca Marina is not an isolated case. The whole coastline is in the process of being reshaped with other developments such as the Morocco Mall, Anfaplace Living Resort, and Wessal Casablanca Port. Likewise, these restructurings are not limited to the coastline itself. Another flagship project, the Casablanca Finance City, aims to create a whole new financial hub in the district of Anfa which has to connect the wider French-speaking African region. Nor is Casablanca itself an exception within Morocco: other mega-projects such as the Bouregreg project in Rabat, Tanger Med and Tanger Metropole in Tangiers are drastically reshaping the urban environment.

These radical urban transformations can be situated within a larger process of economic liberalization, structural adjustment, and neoliberal reform. Moroccan cities played an important role in the changing political economy of the country, not only in terms of the increasing commodification of urban land as a means to extract profits and generate growth, but also as urban laboratories for the development of new modalities of government, control, and domination. Yet in contrast to their utopian promises, urban mega-projects do not solve the contemporary urban crisis in the region, but reproduce it in different ways. These projects do not tackle urban poverty, but relocate it, usually to the outskirts of the city.

If the urban crisis is reproduced, the crucial questions are then by whom, or by what? How and where? These questions have been forcefully addressed by Doreen Massey, who argues that there lies a problem in the way imaginations of the local and the global are often counterposed to each other. The local is usually associated with authenticity, everyday life, cultural particularity, tradition, etc., while the global then refers to an abstract dimension of space situated somehow above the local.[1] This counterposition is thus also hierarchical: with regard to the impact of globalization, Massey argues, the local is usually seen as a passive place affected by global forces or, in other words, as a product of the global, which is therefore always imagined as coming from somewhere else. Because of this, globalization becomes in a way intangible or even otherworldly from the perspective of a local place.

For example, in their book, *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*, Henry Clement and Robert Springborg draw a telling parallel with nineteenth and twentieth century imperialism when they expect that "globalization will be the primary *external* force impacting MENA political economies" in the twenty-first century.[2] Yet, in reality, globalization is not some externality. On the contrary, globalization is always made *in* places. Local places are not passive or powerless. A critical analysis of the politics of mega-projects, for example,

helps us understand how "the global" is grounded, and how cities and other places are in fact laboratories where modalities of government are transformed or re-invented in relation to particular interests, specific balances of power, struggle and resistance.

In this sense, the political transformations related to mega-projects are salient examples of how authoritarianism in Morocco has been transformed by the ways in which the interests of ruling domestic elites and (global) economic elites are increasingly intertwined. A close look into the politics of mega-projects exposes a relational geography of contemporary global capitalism that gives rise to new arrangements whereby "market requirements" now determine and justify the (authoritarian) mode of government. As a result, the making of a new political world in Morocco, and the Arab region more generally, was not only determined by "the regime", or by domestic state-society relations, but increasingly also by interests and interventions related to contemporary neoliberal globalization. The Abu-Dhabi investor Al Maabar co-designs the urban spectacle of the Bouregreg Valley in Rabat, while Wessal Capital, a joint venture between the Moroccan Fund for the Development of Tourism and four GCC-members (Abu-Dhabi, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia), will radically transform the skylines of Casablanca, Tangier, and also Rabat in the near future.

The increasing privatization of public space involves, not only in Morocco but throughout the contemporary urban world, the growing control over urban space in the hands of "non-democratically-elected owners". As a result, places such as the Bouregreg Valley or the shoreline of Casablanca may well be become "globalized spaces," in the sense that they connect different actors from other parts of the world, but this does not mean they will be open spaces that will be easily accessible, let alone affordable to the grand majority of urban residents.[3]

What we commonly understand as neoliberalism is not some social order or political rationality immune to change itself. In my own research, my goal is to understand how particular places and projects contributed to the making of neoliberal government and globalization, and how they might serve as laboratories or models for other places. In the analysis of this relational geography, places such as Casablanca and Rabat are of course not starting points but nodes of connection in the global flow of ideas, methods and struggles that have made our neoliberal social order into what it is today.

Accordingly, the study of the politics involved should take into account two important dimensions. The first dimension is both spatial and relational. The production of urban space involves many different actors coming from different places outside the city itself, while the power relations articulated through the urban process cannot be situated exclusively within a national political context. In other words, neoliberal urban projects are global enterprises and involve all kinds of actors, both foreign and domestic, that influence and even control decision-making processes. As mentioned above, in the case of Morocco, Gulf capital in particular is playing an increasing political role over the past decade in the reshaping of the urban environment.

The second dimension is institutional. More precisely, it concerns the role of the state. The common misconception that increasing globalization leads to a retreat or a decline of the state, both in the West as in the rest of the world, has been refuted for a long time now by a great number of critical scholars coming from a wide range of disciplines. What we observe today is not so much a crisis of the state, but rather a radical transformation of its modes of intervention. State power has been absolutely vital in the remodeling of the city. More specifically, mega-projects have been linked to the creation of specialized state agencies and exceptional zones of sovereignty that make government manifest itself differently across space and establish exclusive or privileged connections to other political actors, mostly private investors.

To conclude, understanding the contemporary politics of neoliberal globalization through the eyes of mega-projects is not an attempt to redefine the local and its relationship vis-à-vis the global, but rather to localize a phenomenon we usually ascribe to the global. It represents the local production of globalization, while at the same time drawing new social, economic and spatial boundaries between ordinary citizens on the one hand, and political elites, foreign investors and global consumers on the other hand. The nature of contemporary politics in Morocco is hidden within the relational complexes that produce those urban spaces. They have given rise to new forms of government, new forms of control and domination and have also, of course, contributed to the creation of the context in which new forms of social protest emerged over the past few years.

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Endnotes

[1] Doreen Massey, *World City*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 165.

[2] Clement Henry and Robert Springborg, R. *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 223, Italics added.

[3] Doreen Massey, *For Space*. (London: Sage, 2005), 152, 190.

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