

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

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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 Marina 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.

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 “globaliza-

tion 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.

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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 Casablanca Marina project under construction (2013) on the left, and the slums across from it, by Koenraad Bogaert.