

# How far can we compare? Migration studies, comparative urbanism and the potential of a trans-Mediterranean perspective

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## Abstract

Through an analysis of migrant incorporation in Rome and Rabat, this article investigates the theoretical, methodological and policy consequences of comparing across the fault lines around which urban migration research is conventionally structured. It critically brings into conversation the “local turn” in migration policy research with debates around comparative urbanism, and discusses how the Mediterranean region and a reconsideration of temporal frames in migration studies can offer a generative framework for comparing cities across the Global “North” and “South.” The comparative analysis considers how, inter alia, legacies of internal mobility, non-state service provision and divergent public discourses about “diversity” illuminate the different ways in which contemporary migration has been negotiated in the two cities. In doing so, the article challenges assumptions about policy path dependency or the smooth transfer of “best practices” and instead points to the possibility of learning from any city, be it Rome or Rabat.

## INTRODUCTION

Cities X and Y are national capital cities. At different stages, during the decades that followed the Second World War, their respective countries were characterised by net emigration. Cities X and Y, however, have never been major producers of emigrants. On the contrary, their histories have been marked by multiple layers of inward

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mobility. During the post-war period, mass internal migration spelt considerable growth for the two cities. In both cases, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of new inhabitants modified the social, cultural and linguistic composition of local society and contributed to the transformation of the built environment, including the construction of informal settlements a few kilometres from the historic centres. The cities in this period saw the expansion of public and service sectors while industrialisation remained minimal. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, the two cities attracted a sizeable flow of western European migrants, but over the last forty years, first X and later Y would also become destinations for migrants from lower-income countries. This more recent migration has coincided with state rescaling and increased investment in local cultural and tourist infrastructures – as a means to simultaneously enhance their international reputations and to compete with national rivals – as well as a shrinking of secure employment opportunities and a deepening housing crisis. In both cities, the majority of non-western migrants have found low-paid, precarious work in service, domestic and construction sectors, while many have ended up living in the same semi-peripheral neighbourhoods where internal migrants had previously settled. These migrants were among the hardest hit economically by the lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020.

On the basis of these opening details, it would appear that cities X and Y offer fruitful prospects for a cross-city analysis of local negotiations of migration that “can contribute to a more in-depth understanding of why and how cities and regions respond differently to similar challenges” (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017: 242). No comparative analysis, however, has ever been conducted of migration in the two cities or, as far as I am aware, of any other issue. This somewhat baffling state of affairs soon makes sense when the identities of the two cities are revealed, for X is Rome and Y is Rabat. It is very rare in migration research to systematically compare a city in Europe with a city in Africa, at least one that considers them *on level terms* and sets out from a recognition of commonalities and overlapping histories. An established body of work on transnational networks has certainly opened up important insights into the longstanding interconnections between localities across these two continents (see, for example, Grillo & Mazzucato, 2008; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000). Nevertheless, disparities in terms of the cities’ wealth and power, their different positions within global urban hierarchies, contrasting political systems, dissimilar volumes of migration, divergent historical relationships with colonialism and the geographical bias of international research and funding have combined to largely limit the range of comparisons in urban migration research to within the same macroregions. Regardless of their interesting analogies and relative proximity to each other,<sup>1</sup> comparing Rome and Rabat would ordinarily not be considered conducive for assessing migrant incorporation and related policymaking in these two cities. Such a comparison transgresses some key geopolitical and epistemological boundaries: the (receiving) “Global North” and the (sending) “Global South,” “Western democracy” and “illiberal autocracy,” “Europe” and “Africa.” It also disrupts the historical frames that determine how localities and the accumulated migratory processes associated with them are selected as suitable for comparative research. Hence, at first sight, such an analysis would appear to be a *comparison too far*.

This article is instead premised on the belief that a transcontinental urban perspective is not only valid but is crucial in order to broaden the reach of urban migration studies, to challenge the ways in which localities are conceptualised and hierarchised in international research and policy agendas, and, most important of all, to be in a position to fully appreciate changes that are occurring at a global scale. The goal of this article is thus to investigate the possibilities, limits and consequences of comparing across the fault lines around which migration research is conventionally structured. I want to argue that comparative analysis of how migration is negotiated across cities does not merely serve to measure constative differences in policy outcomes but is important in the way it heightens sensitivity towards the multilayered contexts in which migration unfolds in a particular locality.

The article is not interested in exploring the (modest) translocal relations that exist between Rabat and Rome, but rather in considering the cities’ entanglement in the same urban and migratory processes. It interrogates why certain elements of European cities are considered to be benchmarks in comparative migration studies, and why other dimensions that might offer productive linkages to other cities elsewhere, such as internal migration or informal urban development, tend to be left out of the picture. This requires us to question the geographical common

sense that underpins the logic of local comparative studies as well as the common periodisations – “old,” “new” and “emergent” destinations – that often work to “deny coevalness” (Fabian, 1983) between different localities.

In order to develop a comparative analysis of the two cities, this article sets out by bringing together the “local turn” in migration studies, which from the outset has been characterised by comparative approaches (Caponio & Borkert, 2010), with contemporaneous debates about comparative urbanism in human geography (Robinson, 2006, 2011, 2016; Ward, 2010) that have revolved around calls to rethink urban theory from a non-western, “southern” perspective. After acknowledging the constructive contributions and blind spots of both approaches, I discuss the extent to which the Mediterranean region and a reconsideration of historical frames in migration studies might offer a generative framework for “North”/ “South” comparisons. At the same time, comparison between Rabat and Rome obliges us to reconsider some of the common critiques in urban migration studies: namely that of methodological nationalism, deemed to be the principal conceptual barrier to the development of an urban comparative perspective, and the overbearing presence of capital and “gateway” cities in research (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009; Martiniello, 2013). In the first case, I suggest the need for a more discerning use of the methodological nationalist critique that pays heed to the divergent roles of cities in nation-making, addresses the contrasting ways in which city–nation–state relations shape migrant incorporation, and is more mindful of the plural histories of migration research, such as in the case of Italy where a focus on the specifically urban dimensions of migration predates the declared “local turn” in Anglophone migration studies by a number of decades (see, for example, Balbo, 1962; Fofi, 1964). In the second case, it is important to bear in mind the different positions of “capital” and “gateway” cities in global fields of power *and* urban migration research. Hence, while Rome and Rabat have attracted attention as key places of arrival and settlement in their respective national contexts, they possess relatively peripheral positions in the global economy (Bogaert, 2018; Thomassen & Vereni, 2014) and have seldom featured in international comparative studies, in contrast to “top-scale” cities such as London or Paris (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009).

This article does not set up Rome and Rabat as paradigmatic cases for advancing a trans-Mediterranean approach. Many other corresponding sets of cities would reveal equally compelling and distinct insights. Moreover, the discussion presented here is not the result of a comparative research design. Rather, it brings together parallel research experiences in the two cities as well as my own interaction with comparative urbanism debates (Dines, 2016, 2019). My interests in Rome are closely tied with the fact that I have been a resident of the city since 2007, have longstanding involvement in local migrant support initiatives and have taught research-based modules in migration studies at local universities. Work in Rabat instead commenced in 2017 with my participation in a comparative project on diversity politics in “Global South” cities based at the European University Institute (Dines, forthcoming). The article draws on evidence gleaned from fieldwork in the two cities that included observation and/or collaboration with migrant organisations, participation in local debates about migration-related matters and the collection of documentary material, as well as analysis of media representations and extensive secondary literature on migration in the two cities. My aim here, however, is not to present a detailed discussion of migration in the two cities but rather to begin to tentatively explore the methodological, theoretical and policy implications of comparing Rome and Rabat and, by doing so, indicate directions for further research. I start by delineating the convergences and divergences between the two cities’ overlapping relationships with internal and international migration; a focus usually overlooked in urban migration studies but which here serves to lay the grounds for a comparative perspective. I proceed to consider two dimensions of the local negotiation of contemporary migration that illuminate the sorts of questions that a trans-Mediterranean comparative approach is able to generate and address: first, the role of non-state actors in service provision; and, second, public discourses about cultural diversity and whether or not these are correlated with international migration. If comparative research, as Bloemraad argues, is not just a question about *what* to compare but also about *how* to compare (Bloemraad, 2013: 27), then the “comparative logics” here rest on the need to venture across those boundaries that have been traditionally conceived in migration studies to be natural, unsurpassable and non-negotiable. Such an endeavour has important consequences for policy debates insofar as it guards against assumptions about policy path

dependence and the smooth transfer of “best practices” and instead opens up the possibility of learning from any city, be it Rome or Rabat.

## LOCAL MIGRATION POLICYMAKING MEETS COMPARATIVE URBANISM

Comparative studies of the local dimension of migration policymaking have primarily focused on large and medium cities in western Europe and North America (Alexander, 2007; Caponio and Borkert, 2010; Zapatero et al., 2017). The units of comparison used to select cases – such as a specific policy arena or localities with common institutional and migratory features that allow for variation finding – have long operated to delimit the range of cities included in research. In Europe, the prevalence of similar sets of cities and regions also reflects the trajectory of European funding programmes and research networks (Martiniello, 2013), which, although increasingly spread out across the continent, continue to be over-represented by “old” migration countries that wield the greatest academic power in Anglophone migration studies, such as the UK, Netherlands, Germany and Sweden (Schmiz et al., 2020). Perhaps most important of all, since its emergence as an identifiable subfield in migration studies in the late 1990s (in part as a reaction to the predominance of national models of integration), local policy research has been less immediately interested in cities per se than in the different levels and forms of governance that shape migrant incorporation. As a result, there is little concern to consider the significance of selecting one city over another on the basis of a locality's position vis-à-vis, for example, unequal geographies of urban knowledge production.

Although comparative policy studies provide fundamental coordinates for exploring responses to migrant incorporation across different local contexts, they are generally less helpful in indicating how we might expand the geographical scope of research. Beyond the policy domain, various migration scholars provide useful leads for broadening the field of analysis: Ribas-Mateos (2004), Malheiros and Vala (2004) and Arbaci (2019), among others, have highlighted the range of crucial issues – such as family-based welfare regimes and divergent patterns of housing segregation – that need to be considered when comparing migration in southern European localities with elsewhere; FitzGerald (2012) and King and Skeldon (2010) have examined the theoretical and empirical implications of integrating the study of internal and international migration; while the influential work of Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009) explores how contemporary urban restructuring both shapes and is shaped by migrants' incorporation in cities. These last two authors have in fact elaborated a “comparative theory of locality” that addresses how migrants contribute through their labour, wealth production and creation of social institutions to the repositioning of cities within national and global fields of economic and political power, be these “top-scale” global cities such as London and Paris or “down-scale” post-industrial cities where the opportunities for migrants' insertion into the urban economy, politics and culture are more limited (ibid.). In contrast to the cities studied by Glick Schiller and Çağlar, Rome and Rabat share more indeterminate positions regarding their relationships with the global economy and rescaling processes. They are not global powerhouses, at least not in the conventional sense, inasmuch as they do not host headquarters of major multinational corporations or possess significant advanced service sectors, while the globally oriented financial centres in their respective countries are located elsewhere (Milan and Casablanca). Nor can they be considered “disempowered cities” (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018: 13-16) because they have continued to wield national and international power by virtue of their status as capital cities, and, in the case of Rome, thanks to the possession of a powerful global imaginary as the global centre of Catholicism and as a historic tourist attraction (Thomassen & Vereni, 2014). Thus, on the one hand, migrants face relatively limited employment opportunities in Rabat and Rome compared with other similar-sized cities, while on the other, as I discuss below, their pathways of incorporation have been simultaneously moulded and restricted by the two cities' ongoing development as *national* capitals.

Even if all cities are in some way bound up with rescaling processes, a shift in the comparative imagination is still required if such insights are to contribute to the development of an empirical and conceptual analysis of migration and cities across traditional territorial divisions. The recent debate in comparative urbanism offers practical

solutions to this end. This debate has been characterised by a range of calls for creative and experimental comparisons that push the frontiers of urban research (Robinson, 2011, 2016). Evolving out of a post-colonial critique of world cities literature, comparative urbanism sets out to reconfigure a global urban studies in which all cities can potentially be brought into comparative relief (Robinson, 2006). This is crucial not only to dethrone western hegemony in urban theory (Roy, 2009), but also to augur a deeper engagement with the interconnected processes of urbanisation at a global scale (Ward, 2010).

A key appeal of comparative urbanism is that its central proposition – that any city can be brought into comparison and thus contribute to urban theory – is straightforward and eminently adoptable. It encourages us to question assumptions about appropriate units of comparative approach and the putative incommensurability of urban experiences. Rather than selecting cases on the basis of similar political or economic environments, we should strive to reimagine comparison as “thinking cities/the urban through elsewhere (another case, a wider context, existing theoretical imaginations derived from other contexts, connections to other places), in order to better understand outcomes and to contribute to broader conceptualisations and conversations about (aspects of) the urban.” (Robinson, 2016: 22). Such an approach might regard, for example the circulation of policy ideas or, in our case here, the unfolding of city–nation–state relations across different settings. Migrant studies can also draw inspiration from the experimental disposition to comparison to think about the multiple relations that exist between all cities. This should not be limited to tracing migrants’ translocal connections, but also include cities’ connections with contiguous flows, such as rural-to-urban internal mobility or, again in our case, north-bound sub-Saharan African migration during the last decade.

Comparative urbanism does not offer a blueprint for research and, indeed, migration has rarely been the focus of sustained attention. While many scholars have channelled their discussion towards resituating non-western cities in urban theory, they have rarely acknowledged the internal differences and situated knowledges that exist within Europe. In particular, research on southern European cities has long questioned the appropriateness of urban models and concepts devised in the (ex-)industrial heartlands of the United States and north-western Europe and has challenged accompanying assumptions about comparative analysis (Arbaci, 2019; Leontidou, 1996; Maloutas & Karadimitriou, 2001). Moreover, the debate has been prevalently conducted in an Anglophone arena, which has meant that some less “Anglo-friendly” areas of the world, including the Mediterranean region as a whole, have not contributed to scholars’ scrutiny of comparative methodologies or the politics of knowledge production. Finally, some have argued that comparative urbanism is ultimately more concerned with deconstruction than with theoretical renewal, which has led to calls for a more constructive dialogue between political economy and post-colonialism (Peck, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite these limits, comparative urbanism fundamentally provides for a more open-ended comparative sensibility and lays the groundwork for tackling the territorial and hierarchical configurations through which cities are habitually located and interpreted. A move towards a more meaningful analysis of Rome and Rabat is thus enhanced by combining the methodological and theoretical concerns of comparative urbanists with the more probing thematic questions posed by migration scholars.

## THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A COMPARATIVE SPACE FOR MIGRATION STUDIES

The Mediterranean region offers a particularly conducive framework for bringing comparative urbanism and migration studies into critical conversation and for bridging territorial divisions. Despite the disparities outlined at the start of this article, the region’s cities possess common features, from urban informality to non-Fordist models of economic development, that confound clear-cut imaginaries of the “Global North” and “Global South.”

Ricard Zapata-Barrero (2020) has recently called for greater engagement with the Mediterranean as a comparative field that challenges the dominant Eurocentric logic underpinning migration studies. While I share the

thrust of Zapata-Barrero's argument, I also think we need to be alert to the pitfalls associated with certain "critical" assumptions about the Mediterranean if this area is to operate as a generative framework for migration research. First, the Mediterranean, as Zapata-Barrero underlines, is a combination of land and water. However, the symbolism of the sea and the dangerous reality of its crossing should not overdetermine representations of migration in the region. Although this body of water over the last two decades has been increasingly embroiled in the iniquities of global migration management, and despite the steep rise in maritime crossings in 2015, the majority of migrants who inhabit cities in the Mediterranean basin actually arrived via land or air routes (Crawley et al., 2018).

Second, migration in the Mediterranean does not simply flow from south to north. This is not just a nod to the region's putative interconnectedness but also acknowledgement of the fact that the majority of international migrants across the region originate from elsewhere. For example, over 50 per cent of Rome's migrant population hails from just five countries – Romania, Philippines, Bangladesh, China and Ukraine – none of which border the Mediterranean.

Third, a Mediterranean framework problematises dichotomous oppositions. Hence, viewing the region through a post-colonial optic is not just about confronting the orientalising gazes that have structured ways of seeing the region across history or contemplating the positions of a formerly colonised "South," important as these both are. Rather, it also provides a critical lens for interrogating the region's internal differences both in light of local power relationships and in connection to other peoples, places and forms of knowledge. This includes, among many things, appreciating the marginalisation of southern European cities in western urban theory (Leontidou, 1996), and acknowledging the histories of slavery and racism on the southern littoral that predate European colonialism and overshadow post-colonial nation building (El Hamel, 2013).

Like everywhere else, the Mediterranean region calls for analytical rigour, but this runs the risk of being relinquished when the Mediterranean is deployed a priori as an epistemological vantage point from which to construct (or deconstruct) ideas about contemporary society. Instead, the Mediterranean needs to be understood first and foremost for what it is: a transcontinental region that is characterised by connections and inequalities and which functions as a strategic setting for governing mobility as well as a host of other international policy issues, from security to heritage. Thus, while it represents the geographical entity that facilitates the stretching of a translocal analysis of migrant incorporation, comparing Rabat and Rome simultaneously works to interrogate "bureaucratic essentialist" discourses that resurrect age-old tropes about the region's shared cultural roots and values (Yiakoumaki, 2011).

## RESTORING DENIED COEVALNESS

Western outsiders have frequently viewed the Mediterranean world as inhabiting a different temporal realm. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the region was seen to constantly lag behind the dominant course of European modernity and, in turn, was differentiated by its own gradations of "backwardness" (Ben-Yehoyada, 2014). Similarly, migration in the region has been conventionally interpreted as unfolding in separate time frames.

The idea of "denied coevalness" – originally coined by Johannes Fabian (1983) to describe the way in which anthropology creates the Other outside the flow of time – has been adopted by Ayse Çağlar (2016) to critically address the analytical distinction between "migrants" and "non-migrants" and how this influences the extent to which people are seen to be actively involved in urban restructuring processes. "Denied coevalness" can also be usefully applied to think about how localities in migration studies are differently interpreted according to their respective countries' historical experiences of international immigration to the exclusion of other forms of mobility, notably internal migration. Southern European countries, including Italy, are commonly defined as "new" migration countries, in contrast to the "old" destinations of north-western Europe, by virtue of the fact that foreign migration did not become a sizeable phenomenon until the 1980s onwards; in other words, after the

demise of welfare-industrial capitalism and during a period of economic restructuring at national and local scales. Meanwhile, Morocco and other non-European states bordering the Mediterranean rim are considered fledgling migration states, as a result of EU migration management immobilising trans-Mediterranean migration and the arrival of refugees from conflict zones in the Middle East and central Asia.

Restoring coevalness means relieving localities of their fixed positions in the old-new-emergent timeline and instead acknowledging how their urban development is shaped by layered histories of different types of mobility. As I demonstrate below, the mass rural-to-urban migrations that occur in both cities during the post-war period (and contemporaneous with post-colonial and guest worker immigration in northern European cities) provide a starting point for a comparison of contemporary migrant incorporation.

## LINKAGES BETWEEN INTERNAL AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN ROME AND RABAT

According to the most recent statistics, 382,000 foreign nationals were registered in Rome, around 13 per cent of the city's total population (Roma Capitale, 2020), while 13,000 officially resided in Rabat, roughly 2 per cent of the total population (RGPH, 2014). As well as their location on opposite sides of the Global North-South divide, these marked numerical differences would seem another deterrent to a comparative analysis of the two cities. Nevertheless, Rome and Rabat have similarly functioned both as destination *and* transit cities. On the one hand, migrants have settled in the two cities thanks to, inter alia, social networks and low-paid and/or informal job opportunities in service, construction, care and retail sectors (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2020; Mourji et al., 2016). Both cities are also destinations for highly skilled and lifestyle North-South migrants, many of whom are either self-employed, for instance in the tourist industry, or are employed by international agencies (such as the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome), non-governmental organisations and private educational institutions (Therrien & Pellegrini, 2015; Thomassen & Vereni, 2014). The limited employment opportunities reflect the relatively low-scale positions of both Rome and Rabat in relation to the global restructuring of capital, as well as the fact that access to high- and low-level positions across various sectors of the cities' economies continues to be regulated by the state which de facto excludes non-citizens. On the other hand, each city has, during certain periods and for certain groups, represented a staging post before onward migration. For example, until the early 2000s, Rome was often considered by North and sub-Saharan African migrants as a preliminary base prior to their transfer to more secure industrial employment in northern Italy (Alexander, 2007), while many recent Eritrean asylum seekers are temporarily "marooned" in Rome, often in squatted buildings, but intend to eventually move to northern Europe (Belloni, 2016). Rabat is a key base and refuge for those sub-Saharan Africans who plan (or who have failed) to cross the borders with Ceuta and Melilla in the north of the country (Alioua, 2007; Bachelet, 2016).

At a general level, therefore, Rome and Rabat appear to possess common migratory experiences. These processes acquire greater comparative significance if we consider the overlapping urban and historical contexts in which they have occurred. The modern histories of both cities are closely bound to their transformation into capital cities and their subsequent close relationship with national and colonial state making and their evolution as political-administrative centres with service-based economies. When Rome became the capital of Italy in 1870, it had a population of just over 200,000 and was the country's fifth largest city after Naples, Milan, Palermo and Turin, and would not become the nation's largest city until the 1920s. Prior to its selection as capital of the French Protectorate in 1912, Rabat was the fourth largest urban settlement in Morocco after Fés, Marrakech and Tangier, but it would grow to temporarily become the nation's second largest city in the 1970s, and today forms the second largest urban conurbation together with the neighbouring cities of Salé and Temara. The high rates of population growth in Rome and Rabat were fuelled by massive internal rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban migration, which reached their apex during the three decades after the Second World War (Abu-Lughod, 1980; Crisci, 2016), and



thus differ somewhat from the slow or negative growth recorded over the same period by large cities in north-western Europe such as London or Amsterdam (see Table 1).

Although the economies of Rome and Rabat have undergone major changes during the last forty years in the face of state restructuring and globalisation, there are lines of continuity in the experiences of internal and international migrants. As both cities experienced limited industrialisation, the economic incorporation of rural migrants during the 1950s and 1960s and migrants from lower-income nations after the 1980s primarily occurred in service and construction sectors. Internal migration also dramatically transformed the social structure and physical layout of Rome and Rabat. In particular, the severe housing shortages, exacerbated by a lack of state intervention and a private construction sector skewed in favour of producing units for high-income residents, would lead to informal and clandestine housing construction on a massive scale. By the 1980s, it was estimated that around 30 per cent of Rome's population lived in the hundreds of informal settlements, ranging from former "borghetti" (shanty-towns) to unauthorised lower-middle-class condominiums (Chioldelli et al., 2020). In Rabat, the early-twentieth-century French plan for the new colonial capital left the ancient medina intact albeit hemmed in by a European district but did not provide housing for rural migrants who streamed into the city from the 1930s onwards and who settled in *bidonvilles* on surrounding land and in the neighbouring city of Salé (Abu-Lughod, 1980; Petonnet, 1972). Inward migration and urban growth accelerated after independence in 1956, while the exodus of many Europeans and Jews from the city in the following two decades saw the reorganisation of urban space and social composition in the city centre as high-status migrants from other historic Moroccan cities, in particular Fès, Marrakech and Meknes, settled in the former colonial districts (Findlay et al., 1984).

Irrespective of the different conditions in which these mass movements took place – such as the abandonment of impoverished agricultural livelihoods in southern Italy after 1945 versus the French colonial state's expulsion of Arab and Berber peasants from Morocco's fertile coastal plains – the resultant uncontrolled expansion of the modern cities would shape the housing trajectories and patterns of settlement of international migrants from low-income countries in Rome (after the 1980s) and Rabat (from the early 2000s). The highest concentration of international migrants in Rome resides in the east of city in the low-income neighbourhoods such as Tor Pignattara and outer self-built settlements such as la Borghesiana where internal labour migrants first settled in the 1950s and 1960s (Roma Capitale, 2020). Rome today also possesses a mass squatting movement that has provided accommodation for almost 10,000 migrants, which traces its roots to the housing rights struggles of southern Italian migrants and political activists in the 1970s (Montagna & Grazioli, 2019). Many sub-Saharan African migrants in Rabat live in the same low-income neighbourhoods that had been built by rural migrants, although some of the larger *bidonvilles* have been demolished as part of the state's Cities without Slums programmes and their

TABLE 1 Population (in '000s) and growth rates, 1936–2011. [Rabat Con. = Rabat-Salé-Temara conurbation] (Sources: Crisci, 2016; RGPH, 2014; Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

	1936	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Rabat	83	156 <sup>52</sup>	231 <sup>60</sup>	375	526 <sup>82</sup>	624 <sup>94</sup>	628 <sup>04</sup>	578 <sup>14</sup>
Growth		+88%	+48%	+62%	+40%	+19%	+0.5%	-8%
Rabat Con.	115	203 <sup>52</sup>	311 <sup>60</sup>	545	918 <sup>82</sup>	1337 <sup>94</sup>	1624 <sup>04</sup>	1874 <sup>14</sup>
Growth		+77%	+53%	+75%	+68%	+46%	+21%	+15%
Rome	1150	1633	2162	2751	2803	2734	2685	2797
Growth		+42%	+32%	+27%	+2%	-2%	-2%	+4%
London	7988 <sup>41</sup>	8164	7781	7449	6608	6887	7172	8174
Growth		+2%	-5%	-4%	-11%	+4%	+4%	+14%
Amsterdam	794 <sup>41</sup>	804	865	820	717	713	739 <sup>03</sup>	767 <sup>10</sup>
Growth		+1%	+8%	-5%	-13%	-0.5%	+4%	+4%



Moroccan inhabitants rehoused in new low-cost housing in satellite towns (Bogaert, 2018). Takaddoum, a partially rehabilitated self-built district south of the city centre, has the largest sub-Saharan African population in Rabat (estimated at 2,000) and is considered the national “nerve centre” of those trying to reach Europe (Bachelet, 2016).

Housing markets and policies have changed considerably over the last forty years. In Rome, for example the increase in home ownership (also due to amnesties on illegal dwellings) and the liberalisation of the rental market, as well as instances of everyday and institutional racism and restricted access to dwindling social housing and private rental stock, have exacerbated precarious housing conditions of foreign migrants in recent decades (Arbaci, 2019: 200-204). However, rather than consigning internal mobility to a separate era and seeing urban informality as anomalous vis-à-vis the welfarist policies of “old immigration” northern European cities, a comparison between Rabat and Rome is able to bring these very dimensions to the fore and encourages a more probing engagement with the interconnections between different forms of urban-bound mobility. As Kevin Ward argues, a relational comparative approach in urban research stimulates “different cities to pose questions of each other” (2010: 480). It is through this “mutual question posing” that I now briefly consider two issues – non-state actors’ involvement in integration policy and local discourses about diversity – to reflect on how our trans-Mediterranean perspective might reorient our understanding of the relationship between migration and cities.

## NON-STATE ACTORS IN MIGRANT SERVICE PROVISION

Migrant integration policy in Rome and Rabat relies heavily on non-state actors for service delivery. In both cities, there are over 60 officially recognised lay, religious and migrant associations that operate in partnership with the local or central state (Fioretti et al., 2014: 60; MCMREAM, 2016). In Rome, these range from Catholic organisations such as Caritas and Centro Astalli that manage counselling centres and shelters to the left-leaning non-profit association ARCI that runs help desks and language classes. Key examples in Rabat include Morocco’s first migrant support organisation, the Fondation Orient-Occident (FOO), which coordinates, inter alia, access to health assistance and job training, and GADEM a locally based national anti-racist and migrant rights organisation specialised in legal support. Instead of viewing local integration policy in Rome as underdeveloped in contrast to its western European counterparts (OECD, 2019), or interpreting the situation in Rabat as the singular case of an autocratic regime compelled to come to terms with a fledgling migrant population,<sup>2</sup> this apparent convergence across the two cities encourages us to reflect on the specific conditions in which non-state actors have assumed a key role in migration governance.

An important point to consider is that service providers in the two cities interact with different levels of government. In Rome, non-state actors engage principally with local and regional government. Since the early 1990s, local authorities have been obliged to ensure migrants’ access to universal welfare, but targeted integration measures such as language tuition and vocational courses schemes have been delegated to an experienced and politically savvy third sector. The reasons for this vary from the absence of embedded expertise within local institutions, spending restrictions on hiring in-house personnel and cuts to public services to the fact that integration policy has often been emergency driven, exemplified by the reception system for asylum seekers following the “migrant crisis” of 2015 (Fioretti et al., 2014; OECD, 2019). Hence, while local government in Rome shifted from an initial “non-policy” towards an “espoused pluralist policy” (Alexander, 2007), in which the necessity to respond to migrants’ different social and economic needs was acknowledged, its integration strategy has remained fragmented and dependent upon non-state actors.

In contrast, local civil society organisations in Rabat deal directly with national government ministries and international agencies, partly due to their common location in the Moroccan capital, but largely because decision-making and resource allocation in the field of migration resides in the hands of the central state. The reform of immigration policy in 2013, on the orders of the King Mohammed VI, officially recognised the role of civil society in implementing an integration strategy. Meanwhile, the role of local government in migration governance has

remained negligible, despite increasing decentralisation over the last decade (Houdret & Harnisch, 2019). Rabat-based organisations such as FOO and GADEM are not just service providers: through their institutional channels and campaigning capacities, they are able to influence the direction of national policy (and its repercussions at the urban scale), and are simultaneously deployed as diplomatic capital by the Moroccan state in its attempt to court international favour, especially in Africa, through its claim to champion a human rights approach to migration management (Natter, 2018). As the national capital and a principal centre of migrant settlement, Rabat represents a key setting in which the state-civil society collaboration in migration governance is operationalised and transmitted to national and international audiences.

## DIVERSITY DISCOURSES IN RABAT AND ROME

The correlation between “diversity” and “migration” has become a guiding doxa in urban migration research and is endorsed in the policy language of some “top-scale” European cities. An emblematic case is London where the link between migration and diversity has been deployed by Labour (Ken Livingstone and Sadiq Khan) and Conservative (Boris Johnson) administrations, even if inflected differently, as a means to promote the economic and cultural attractiveness of a cosmopolitan metropolis (Raco & Kesten, 2018). In short, neoliberal restructuring transforms elements of migration into marketable assets that contribute to the competitive standing of some cities (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009).

This, however, is not the case in Rome or Rabat. In both cities, official discourses about cultural diversity tend to be detached from international migratory processes, either because this idea is bound up with the renegotiation of pre-existing diversities within the nation or because it lacks explanatory power in public definitions of migration. Hence, Rabat has been directly implicated in the state's reimagining of Morocco as inclusive of previously marginalised linguistic and ethnic minorities. For instance, the belated official recognition of the Amazigh (Berber) minority as constitutive of Moroccan identity has been incorporated into the redesign of the national capital through the recent addition of signage in Tifinagh (the Amazigh alphabet) on public buildings alongside Arabic and Latin characters and the construction of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture in the government ministry district (Dines, forthcoming).

Meanwhile, authorities in Rome have promoted the city's rich Jewish heritage as a means to enhance its appeal as a cosmopolitan tourist destination, but they usually stop short of publicly endorsing the contributions that contemporary migrants make to the city (Herzfeld, 2014). This has less to do with local institutions' indifference to the marketability of ethnic differences than with the recurrent politicisation of international migration at the national and local levels. Migration continues to be represented across the mainstream media as an ongoing phenomenon that lacks history, and dominant definitions of migratory processes are couched in terms of security, economic benefits and costs, social inclusion and exclusion. This contrasts markedly to the state-driven, “human rights-based” migration strategy in Morocco where, despite instances of conflict between locals and migrants, migration has yet to become the subject of political controversy.

The detachment between discourses about diversity and the local negotiation of migration appears less dependent on the particular size or composition of the migrant population, its perceived contribution to the local economy or a sense of place, or to a change in political leanings of the local government, than on the complicated relationship between nation-state and capital city. Migration in Rabat is contemporaneous to the city's reconfiguration as a post-Arab capital, while in Rome, it unfolds in a city juggling its own place in a fragmented national identity with its status as the centre of political power (Herzfeld, 2009). This calls on policy makers to think more carefully about the particular “diversity management regime” (Levitt, 2015) of a city – in other words, the different conditions under which ideas about diversity are (or are not) spoken about – otherwise well-meaning transnational programmes aimed at valorising the contributions of migration at the urban scale are destined to fail.

If the nation-state has played a substantial part in variously framing official (non-)discourses about diversity at the city scale, these have at the same time been renegotiated and challenged within critical and grassroots public spheres that have drawn on local experiences of migration to address overlooked questions of racism, colonialism and slavery both at the urban and national level. In Rome, “second-generation” musicians and writers, such as the Italian-Somali author Igiaba Scego, have revisited Rome’s colonial past and its traces within the built environment and migrants’ life stories (Scego & Bianchi, 2014). While remaining marginal to hegemonic representations of the city, these positions have acquired increasing space as counter-narratives in public debates on migration in the city. Meanwhile, the settlement of sub-Saharan migrants in Rabat has been accompanied by critical debates among local civil society activists, public intellectuals and visiting international scholars such as Felwine Sarr and Chouki El Hamel about histories of racism towards black Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans as well as the taboo topic of slavery. Although such debates have largely been framed in national terms, they have at times addressed local pasts, such as the role of the principally Black African ‘Abid al-Bukhari army in governing and defending Rabat during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ei Hamel, 2013) vis-à-vis the more exclusive narrative about the city’s Andalusian roots (Bahrami, 1995). In other words, local experiences of migration in Rabat combined with the city’s strategic role in transmitting an officially endorsed multicultural national identity have become a conduit through which to intervene critically in public discussions about cultural diversity and its associated conflicts.

## CONCLUSIONS

Comparing Rabat and Rome is not a straightforward exercise: it is constantly held in check by the risk of stretching the analysis too far, and the awareness of having to renounce contextual depth for the comparison to be workable. These brief considerations are not meant to capture the complexities that structure migration and its management in Rome and Rabat or to articulate the complicated restructuring processes of two cities that historically experienced limited industrialisation. Rather, they begin to indicate how two putatively incommensurable cities can be brought into comparative relief and, by doing so, generate alternative entry points to thinking about the urban governance of migration. These include grappling with (dis)continuities between internal and international migration; the divergent relations between city and nation-state; the detachment of “diversity” from “migration” in institutional discourses vis-à-vis the way the latter becomes a catalyst for exploring the two cities’ relationships with longer histories of colonialism and slavery.

The cross-city analysis also raises methodological and theoretical issues of a more general nature as well as important lessons for policy makers on how to approach the topic of migrant incorporation beyond Europe’s north-western quadrant. First, it indicates that there is still much to be gained by comparing capital cities. It is not necessarily the focus on a particular type of paradigmatic city that has restricted the scope of comparative studies of migration but the limited geographical remit of this research and the denied coevalness of cities’ relationships with different types of mobility.

Second, the comparison has indicated the importance of taking city–nation-state relations seriously and how such relations shape the ways in which international mobility is framed at the local level. The critique of methodological nationalism has been crucial to the “local turn” in policy research. But, as Glick Schiller and Çağlar have always stressed, the goal is not to do away with the nation-state but to understand how this is rescaled through cities. This is demonstrated vividly in the case of Rabat where national migration policy is tried and tested in the city and where local institutional discourses about diversity are bound up with the Moroccan state’s belated acknowledgement of internal cultural differences as part of its project to remould national identity.

Third, this article has drawn on debates in comparative urbanism to investigate how comparative research can broaden urban migration studies beyond the empirical and theoretical heartlands in the West. The point is not simply to bring into view more non-western cities in order to provincialise knowledge production, but to begin to compare across the “Global North” and “Global South” in order to question how these two master frames

themselves inform and delimit our understandings of the experience and negotiation of migration at the urban scale.

Finally, the Mediterranean region has provided the framework for both organising and problematising North-South urban comparisons. Clearly this requires paying heed to deep inequalities that exist between the different “sides” but, as I have argued, we also need to be wary of conflating the research on migration and cities with counter-narratives about the Mediterranean as an “alternative space” (e.g. to Eurocentrism) if the latter overlook the complex power relations that have long crisscrossed the region and which risk leading us into an empirical cul-de-sac. Hence, Rome is the capital of a former colonial power that is today central to the EU’s migration management regime but is, at the same time, caught between Europe’s “South” and Italy’s own souths. Post-independence Rabat was shaped by the legacy of the French colonial urban project but also by the Arab-Islamic nation’s silencing of ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. Rome and Rabat have both directly been influenced by recent North-South migratory flows in the Mediterranean region. Yet, as already noted, the majority of Rome’s international migrant population hails from elsewhere. Likewise, Rabat is not just part of a Mediterranean space of migration, but it has increasingly been reconfigured, from above and replete with contradictions, as an *African* space, in which migration policy and humanitarian discourses about south-south migration are wielded as diplomatic tools by the Moroccan state in its quest to reinvigorate its international relations and economic interests across the continent. On this point, it is significant that Rabat was recently selected as the venue for the African Union’s new Migration Observatory. Such dimensions need to be fully appreciated when analysing the management and incorporation of migration at the urban scale so as not to fall into the trap of viewing Rabat in a space that is defined by, and consequently following in the wake of Europe.

This article is not just about X (Rome) and Y (Rabat). Comparing Rome and Rabat is clearly not about identifying an overall “path dependence” in local migration policy. The question is not whether or not Rabat will evolve along the lines of Rome but how we can bring the contemporaneous experiences of migration in these or other cities into conversation in order to better understand the urban challenges and responses associated with migration across the wider world today.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.12840>.

## ENDNOTES

1. The distance between Rabat and Rome is 2,000 kilometres. Thanks to the liberalization of Morocco’s air travel market, since the mid-2000s a bi-weekly low-cost flight has existed between the two cities.
2. For a critique of the democratic/autocratic dichotomy vis-à-vis Morocco’s migration policy, see Natter 2018.

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