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INTRODUCTION



## Managing cultural diversity and (re)defining the national in 'global South' cities

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This themed section brings together papers that were first presented at the conference 'Cultural pluralism in cities of the "global South"' held at the European University Institute in Florence on 20 and 21 March 2019. The three contributions explore the formation, representation and management of cultural diversity (broadly defined to include ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious diversity, today and in the past) in cities outside the West and how these processes get entangled with definitions and redefinitions of the nation and national identity (Triandafyllidou 2017). In doing so, they focus on a set of themes – the politics of cultural diversity, the transformation of the urban 'global South'<sup>1</sup> and the ongoing project of nation building – which, to date, have been addressed largely in isolation.

Some general explanations can be offered for the lack of sustained scholarly attention to the interconnections between our three key themes. On the one hand, because the field of urban studies has often used globalisation as an overarching point of departure or reference, it has tended to sideline the nation (Therborn 2011). On the other hand, because much research on cities in the 'global South' has focused on pressing issues, such as the effect of rapid demographic growth on the built environment or local responses to economic and infrastructural challenges, until relatively recently there has been (understandably) limited scrutiny of the significance of the politics of culture and diversity at the urban scale in this part of the world.<sup>2</sup> We believe that exploring the complex linkages between cultural diversity, the city, and the nation can provide important insights into the major challenges facing cities in the 'global South', including those with explicit 'global city' aspirations.

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Moreover, by viewing cultural diversity as a crucial dimension for understanding questions at stake in contemporary cities, this themed section seeks to also overcome what Mike Savage and others have recently defined 'the problematic dualism [...] between a culturally sensitive approach to cities that has little to say about urban inequality on the one hand, and a political-economic perspective that eschews direct interests in cultural processes on the other' (Savage et al. 2018, 139).

### Questioning the city-diversity dyad

As Tatiana Matejskova and Marco Antonsich observe at the start of their edited volume *Governing through Diversity: Migration Societies in Post-Multiculturalist Times*, 'it has become hard to avoid "diversity" today, especially in the global north' (2015, 1). They later add in their conclusion that, more than anywhere else, this dimension is associated – intentionally or unwittingly – with the space, scale and experience of the city (2015, 205). Urban researchers tend to invoke a series of ritual arguments when discussing culture and diversity in cities. These include the notion that all cities are the sites of multiple cultural identities, practices and encounters. They also include the premise that all cities are historically constituted in some way by human mobility, be it rural-to-urban, internal or international. Another well-rehearsed argument is that, in an era of increased globalisation, we are not witnessing cultural homogenisation, but rather 'the provision of new spaces for the clashing [and mixing] of cultures' (Featherstone and Lash 1999). It is precisely the city, many scholars argue, that offers the optimal testing ground where these encounters can be contemplated and evaluated.

Yet, as Matejskova and Antonsich note, 'the idea that the urban is dynamic, lived and plural while the national is static, abstract and singular [...] is an empty trope that uncritically fixes meanings to places rather than studying when, where and how these meanings come to the fore' (2015, 206). Furthermore, assumptions about the inherent linkages between diversity and cities overlook the often marginal place of diversity discourses in policy arenas outside Anglophone settings (Escarf-Dublet and Lelévrier 2019), or the fact that linguistic variations of 'diversity' in some political and national contexts, especially outside North America and northern Europe, do not necessarily correlate with international migration. On the contrary – as the case studies of Bogotá and Rabat in this themed section indicate – diversity can be more closely aligned with the negotiation and government of *internal* cultural differences which are imbricated in the complex processes of post-colonial nation making.

It is, therefore, important to consider the extent to which common refrains about diversity and cities are actually incorporated into urban agendas in different regions of the world and to apprehend what the (different)

languages of diversity actually *do* when they are ‘put into action’ (Ahmed 2007, 237). It would appear, particularly in many Western cities, that most local politicians and elites are comfortable to talk up the diversity of their cities while their national counterparts are more inclined to denounce the ‘excesses’ of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, including those who previously lauded the *mixité* and ‘global talent’ of world cities (like Boris Johnson when Mayor of London) only to subsequently reposition themselves on the national stage as advocates of what Willem Schinkel astutely terms ‘multicultealism’ (Schinkel 2018).<sup>3</sup> The somewhat rosy view about the readiness of those in positions of power to embrace urban diversity stands in contrast to the similarly axiomatic observation that it is in the city where economic inequalities and social divisions, dangers and security threats, forms of control and surveillance are at their greatest and most visible. Moreover, it is in the city where conflicts around cultural diversity (from acts of racism and inter-group violence to contested definitions about diversity itself) are most likely to play out publicly. A key starting point for this themed section, therefore, is not to describe and reaffirm the cultural diversity of a given city. Rather, it is to examine how cultural diversity is understood and how elites put these understandings to work as a way to refashion the internal and external images of a city or to make room for different groups to take their place there.

Today the longstanding tendency to equate the city with diversity assumes added significance given the recent rise in right-wing populism across the world. An increasingly common argument is that the city, due to its greater predilection to accommodate diversity, could serve as a bastion of resistance to the anti-pluralist, anti-migrant and separatist discourses and policies of national governments. However, in response to popular celebratory accounts about the economic roles, democratic qualities and autonomous capabilities of cities (spelt out most clearly in Benjamin Barber’s 2013 book *If Mayors Ruled the World*), scholars have started to critically question the idea that cities are inherently more progressive and open to diversity than other scales of governance (Rossi 2018). Researchers have also called for renewed attention to the relationship between the city and the nation-state (Therborn 2017; Jonas and Wilson 2018). At the same time, there has been a revived interest in the ways in which nationalism develops so as to negotiate new and old forms of diversity and pressures from both above and below. Tariq Modood speaks of multicultural nationalism (2019) seeking to strike a balance between ethnic minority and national majority claims, Riva Kastoryano (2018) develops a notion of transnational nationalism to reflect on the phenomenon of nationalist exclusion through transnational exposure and openness, in a world of increased migration and inter-dependence, while Anna Triandafyllidou (2020) speaks of plural vs neo-tribal nationalism to emphasise how national identities may respond through openness or closure

to the challenges of migration and globalisation. All these discussions, however, still focus primarily on Europe and North America. Moreover, neat divisions, such as city versus nation, cultural pluralism versus ethnic particularism and native-born versus immigrant do not always play out in similar ways around the world.

### Thinking diversity, the urban and the national from the 'global South'

This themed section seeks to address the gap in literature on the intersections between diversity, cities and the national by focusing on cities outside the West where the national is a dimension against which urban cultural diversity gets addressed, measured, manipulated and mobilised and where cultural politics and cultural policy unfold in innovative and unexpected ways. In cities of the 'global South', the popular mantra about the 'decline of the nation' often fails to materialise or simply has not been expressed. This is not because globalisation is less pronounced or less 'advanced' outside the West. Rather, it is precisely because – as Roy and Ong (2011) argue – the ways in which cities project their own particular visions of the world, and their place within it, are often intimately bound up with the simultaneous claim on the part of their respective nations to a place on the global stage as well. Writing in relation to Asian cities, Roy and Ong observe:

'As is the case with early modern nations, cities in the emerging world today have come to embody nationalist ambitions of wealth, power, and recognition. Major cities in the developing world have become centers of enormous political investment, economic growth, and cultural vitality, and thus have become sites for instantiating their countries' claims to global significance' (Roy and Ong 2011, 2).

There is thus a need to better understand how cities of the 'global South' are enmeshed in national space and how their globalising strategies are not circumventing the national scale, but somehow are unfolding in relation to it. By doing so, cities actively reconfigure the meanings of national identity and belonging. This concern runs parallel to the conviction among critical scholars that – in view of rapid urbanisation across the planet and the immense and complex challenges that this brings – the move towards a truly *global* urban studies can only come about if we recognise the limits and consequences of allowing western European and North American cities to continue to set the theoretical agenda. Over the last two decades, there has been a vibrant debate regarding a 'southern turn' in urban studies (Robinson 2006; Roy and Ong 2011; Parnell and Oldfield 2014; see also Dines 2016 for a critique of the contemporaneous neglect of pre-existing southern thought in the urban peripheries of Europe). This debate has not

just stayed within the confines of the academy but has also reverberated across the agendas of national governments, policy makers, development agencies, non-governmental organisations and social movements. Viewing the city through a 'southern urban lens', it is argued, radically shifts our perspective by bringing into focus a host of cities, with distinctive contexts and histories, that were previously deemed too marginal to have much theoretically to offer (Parnell and Oldfield 2014).

As the contributions to this themed section highlight, questions of diversity in 'global South' cities play out at multiple levels. Here we want to pinpoint three aspects in order to lay out the key issues at stake. First, in theoretical debates, the idea of diversity is often less associated with the assorted dimensions of cultural or social difference than with the broad domain of urban experience itself, insofar as non-Western cities are seen to offer alternative models to hegemonic ways of thinking about urbanisation and urbanism. Hence, in her pioneering book *Ordinary Cities*, Jennifer Robinson calls for 'a post-colonial account of urban modernity [...] that can learn from the *diverse* tactics of urban living around the world and that can move beyond parochial analyses of Western urban modernity to embrace a *diversity* of ways of being urban' (2006, 40, italics added). Second, in substantive terms, the notion of diversity, along with its related concepts and renderings in other languages, captures an array of social and cultural phenomena like everywhere else, but in many non-western urban contexts it also specifically extends to grappling with the major demographic transformations brought about by internal migrations from different regions in recent decades and is likewise tied up with postcolonial and post-independence processes of acknowledging and incorporating previously suppressed or neglected ethnic, linguistic and religious differences into a national polity. Third, as a policy discourse, the idea of diversity often finds itself caught in tension between, on the one hand, endogenous articulations about social and cultural difference (which might overlap with local conceptualisations of, say, 'tradition' and 'modernity') and, on the other, dominant western narratives about diversity, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism that circulate in the global arena and which are intercepted and manipulated for a set of overlapping goals, from the rebranding of a city in the global marketplace to endowing credibility and legitimacy to wider political projects such as nation and state building. As these three points suggest, it is by attending to the entanglement of the global, national and local scales that we are able to make better sense of the ways in which the languages of diversity operate in and across different non-western cities.

## The contributions

The articles in this themed section grapple with the possibilities, limits, dilemmas, frictions and contradictions that underpin the definition and management of diversity and how these are influenced by each city's overlapping relationships with the nation and globalisation. The three contributors, who examine respectively Bogotá, Dubai and Rabat, all offer novel perspectives on the interconnections between cultural diversity, globalisation agendas and nation (re)building at the urban scale. The cities under analysis are located across three continents and can be separated into different categories and sizes, for instance, political capitals (Rabat, Bogotá), mega-cities (Bogotá) or 'Alpha+ World cities' (Dubai). However, rather than focusing on different city types, we have opted for a more open-ended thematic approach that allows for a cross-comparison of different situated relationships between cultural diversity, urban development and the nation state.

In her contribution, Giulia Torino interrogates the relation between Colombia's shift from a republican assimilationist project to the constitutional acknowledgement of its multi-ethnic composition and Bogotá's own turn to cosmopolitan multiculturalism. Focusing her attention on Bogotá's burgeoning but, in large part, socially and economically marginalised Afro-descendant population, and combining discourse analysis with ethnographic fieldwork, Torino explores the ambiguous role of local planning frameworks in constructing, intercepting and capitalising on ethnic difference in the city, for example through the design of 'intercultural' spaces in public parks. Although Colombia's move towards a more pluri-ethnic understanding of national identity has led to new opportunities for rethinking the place of blackness in Bogotá – a city historically conceived as Europhile and white-centric but now increasingly promoted as the cosmopolitan capital of a diverse nation – the author demonstrates how this process at the same time diverts attention away from the racial discrimination and segregation shaping the urban livelihoods of Afro-Colombians. Taking inspiration from both Latin American and international critical literature, Torino develops the idea of the 'urban governmentality of multiculturalism' as a system of institutional imaginaries and regulatory practices that operate to control and extract value from ethno-racial diversity without tackling the structural inequalities in which this is embedded.

Amin Moghadam's article examines the staging of cultural diversity in the annual Dubai Art Fair, a key event in the international arts calendar and a significant platform used to promote both Dubai and the United Arab Emirates to the rest of the world. Moghadam's central argument is that the combination of the UAE's nation-state-building project, the implementation of neoliberal urban policies, and increasing security concerns have led the Dubai authorities to promote a selective and discretionary representation of

diversity that obscures those aspects – such as the historic presence of Iranian and Yemeni communities – perceived to jar with the rhetoric of global nationalism. Given the long histories of migration in the Gulf region and the high non-national composition of the local population, the author notes that there is nothing new about the negotiation of diversity in Dubai or the UAE. However, the ways in which diversity is discussed, the terminology used and the venues in which it is represented have evolved over time, in line with changing socio-economic situations in the UAE, the development of its cities, and the political intentions underlying the projection of these values across different spatial scales. Based on ethnographic accounts of the Dubai Art Fair across different spaces in the city, the author explores how the liberal enclaves of cosmopolitan contemporary art are dislocated from the everyday local experiences of diversity and non-citizenship at the same time as being embroiled in the ongoing design to enhance the UAE's political and soft power at the global level.

In the final contribution, Nick Dines explores the redevelopment and regeneration of Rabat through the lens of Morocco's diversity politics during the reign of Mohammed VI. While recognising the neoliberal agenda and globalising aspirations that underpin these processes, Dines argues that urban restructuring in Rabat has also become an expedient for transmitting more plural ideas about national identity. Through two cases – the creation of new cultural infrastructures in the city centre and the institutionalisation of Amazigh culture and the accompanying introduction of Tifnagh script on public buildings – the author interrogates the ways in which the Moroccan state's recent acknowledgement and promotion of cultural diversity has assumed form in the capital city and has worked to reposition Rabat vis-à-vis new narratives about the nation and its relationship with Africa and the wider world. In doing so, Dines adopts and critically develops the idea of 'diversity management regime' to think about how diversity operates in Rabat, the dimensions that get included and excluded within its remit, and the sorts of challenges it faces in the political arena. According to Dines, the contradictions that underscore Rabat's transformation into a showcase for a multicultural nation are to be understood in the limits of the democratisation of Moroccan society over the last two decades.

In sum, the three contributions all examine how the languages of diversity are put into action by state and elite actors in different non-western cities. In doing so, they respond to Matejskova and Antonsich's call for 'more research on how diversity is apprehended, interpreted, operationalized, evoked and practiced [as well as] governmentality-inspired perspectives for critical diversity studies that conceive diversity through its productive or generative capacities in all possible forms' (2015, 4). At the same time, by moving beyond what Giulia Torino terms 'the epistemic dominion of Euro-American debates



and case studies', the articles provide us with more nuanced accounts of the city-diversity relationship; a relationship that clearly interconnects with global (neo)liberal agendas of competitiveness and cosmopolitanism but which is also implicated in the complex, contradictory and ongoing process of nation making.

## Notes

1. We use 'global South' in inverted commas in this introduction to underline the fact that the conceptual significance and geographical reach of this increasingly common term are not fixed but open to discussion.
2. For examples of the emerging literature on urban cultural governance in the 'global South', see (Mbaye and Dinardi 2019; Minty and Nkula-Wenz 2019).
3. Schinkel describes multiculturalism as 'the self-declared "realism" of supposedly having been "multicultural" and hence "politically correct", naively "left-wing", "ignoring the problems" (with immigrants, with "Islam", and so on), but of now having become realist, daring to speak the harsh truth about the troubled realities of a failing model of immigrant integration' (Schinkel 2018, 2). For a critical analysis of the current British prime minister Boris Johnson's deployment of diversity discourses during his two terms as mayor of London between 2008 and 2016, see (Raco and Kesten 2018).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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