

Tangier from Below Two books reviewed

Natalia Ribas-Mateos: “Tanger, Maroc: La sociologue d’une ville-frontière (A Sociological Study of Tangiers, Morocco).” With a Préface par Rosa María de Madariaga.

Dieter Haller: “Tanger: Der Hafen, die Geister, die Lust. Eine Ethnographie.”

Steffen Wippel

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Two books have recently been published that seek to shed light on the considerable contemporary reconfigurations experienced by and in the northern Moroccan city of Tangier. For a long time, the state’s central authorities neglected Tangier and the northern provinces of Morocco. However, since the late 2000s, the Tangier Peninsula has been experiencing deep urban and economic transformations. A vast brand-new container port connects Tangier to the world, terrestrial infrastructure has been upgraded, the old inner-city port is being converted into a sumptuous shopping and leisure zone, tourism is under expansion and high-standard, mostly gated residential communities, are being constructed. At the same time, however, the globalizing city is experiencing a growing spatial and social fragmentation. Among other things, Tangier is a nodal hub in transcontinental migration, and certain quarters have become reputed strongholds for Jihadists and Salafists.

With that, Tangier has attracted new attention in the broader public, but in particular in academia. Several research projects have been initiated in recent years, and a growing number of publications are appearing. This contrasts with a substantial body of literature on the city’s cosmopolitan past, when it was under multina-

tional administration and, at times, was an International Zone that was territorially separated from the rest of the country – a period whose loss is still widely bemoaned. Current publications, mainly written by geographers, economists and political scientists, mostly take a macro-perspective on the large-scale reconfigurations of the city, the expansion of mega-projects and their socio-economic and ecological effects. At the same time, micro-analyses, in particular from sociological and anthropological points of view, are largely missing – a gap that the two publications under review assertively endeavor to close.

The first book was published by Natalia Ribas-Mateos, a sociologist who has been a researcher at several universities in Spain and abroad, and whose work has repeatedly focused on issues of age, remittances and mobilities.¹ Dieter Haller, author of the second book, is a professor for social anthropology at the Ruhr University of Bochum and a co-founder of the Centre for Mediterranean Studies there; his research centers on topics like cosmopolitanism, sexuality and ethnicity. Besides gender, both authors have a common interest in border issues; namely, they have worked on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar and have shown an extensive interest in research on the wider Mediterranean.

Haller started to do research in Tangier in 2013 when he had the opportunity to leave his university post in Bochum for nearly one year of continuous fieldwork. In contrast, Ribas-Mateos based her research on discontinuous, sequential fieldwork in several stages between 2002 and 2008. Participant observation was Haller's central research methodology, while Ribas-Mateos shares with her readers her reflections on "distanced participation" vs. "participating distancing". According to her, her several trips to Tangier allowed her to keep her external perspective and to generalize her findings, while Haller underlined the importance of manifold inclusionary moments when, for instance, he nearly became a member of the *Ḥamādša* brotherhood (cf. below). Additionally, his research methods include Facebook conversations, from which he presents several excerpts. While Ribas-Mateos points to the difficult terrain in Morocco, especially regarding access to private enterprises, she considers her status as a foreigner to have facilitated parts of her research.

The two authors pursue a number of common issues, but also address dissimilar points and accent topics differently. The analysis of border effects and of practices of coping with daily urban

life is a central ambition of both monographs; this also includes migration issues and the deconstruction of outdated myths. Yet, while Ribas-Mateos has a stronger interest in patterns of familial and economic patchworks, Haller concentrates more on the spiritual and sensuous sides of life in Tangier. He presents us an extensive introduction followed by a sequence of seven chapters of varying length and a summarizing epilogue. In contrast, his counterpart divides her book into two parts: The first three chapters develop a kind of reference model for her subsequent ethnographic study of seven chapters, which advance from general aspects to more concrete details. In addition to the foreword, an epilogue by Saskia Sassen closes her book.

In his first chapter, Haller starts to introduce his topics with the help of the history of the house in Tangier where he lived during a long period of his field research. This and his chapter on cosmopolitanism both connect to the memory of the city's international period (ch. 2). While reference is frequently publicly made to the historical legacy of the city, in fact it is not maintained and often annihilated, by carelessness, but also by a postcolonial attitude. In contrast, certain strata still remember the international time as a period of personal

liberties. For her part, Ribas-Mateos starts by reviewing the diversity of notions about the city that have been and are still being applied to Tangier (ch. 1). This allows her to give a historical overview, too, and to tackle the nostalgic mystification of the past and its erosion.

Beyond their investigation of processes “at the bottom”, both authors point in the middle of their respective publications to pervasive macro-reconfigurations of Tangier at the moment of their field research. For Ribas-Mateos, this is the outsourced and offshore industries that made Tangier also an “industrial city” (ch. 6). Besides working ethics and working culture, her main interest is in the experiences and strategies of families and individuals dealing with the massive presence of subcontractors for foreign firms. This joins with the subsequent broaching of urban polarization, briefly particularly addressing expats in Tangier, their myths and dreams, their interests and inclinations, their prejudices and racism (ch. 7). Export-oriented industrialization creating domestic demand for labor, and international labor migration driven by the need for manpower abroad, seem to be two sides of the same coin for Ribas-Mateos (ch. 9).

Haller’s focus, in contrast, is on the current urban reconfigurations emerging from the new economic and infrastructural projects that are involved in the modernization of the city (ch. 5). He gives an overview of the three main programs, but concentrates on the shifting of the port to the agglomeration’s periphery and on the effects that the conversion of the old port area into a luxury consumer and tourist destination has on the inhabitants of the adjacent medina – rather more in terms of perception and belief in the future than in material terms. Rich ethnographic details – including portraits of fishermen, fishmongers, artists and an antiquarian – illustrate the effects of the modernization projects in the context of the remodeling of the old city harbor. Likewise, Ribas-Mateos includes many exemplary cases throughout her text.

Relating to her interest in border issues, Ribas-Mateos presents Tangier in her introduction – among other things – as a “border city” (ch. 1). Repeatedly, she goes into the ambivalent meaning of territorial and cultural borders, which fluctuate between closing and opening and create spaces of physical containment, but which also are gates for cultural interpenetration, offer opportunities for contact and exchange and instigate alternative,

yet highly vulnerable, circuits (namely, in ch. 1, 2, 5). Other chapters point to the hardening of the nearby sea and land borders through militarization and materialization (ch. 4, 5).

The border topic links with the migration theme when Ribas-Mateos presents Tangier as a “transit place” (ch. 1, 5) and a “waiting room” (ch. 2), but also a “point of departure” for migrants (ch. 8). The author differentiates several types of people crossing the borders around the Tangier Peninsula to and from the Spanish mainland and the Ceuta enclave (ch. 4). She points to their different experiences and to the different images they create of migrants and borders. Finally, she turns to the importance of remittances for the socio-economic sustenance of Tangier and its inhabitants (ch. 8). Among the motives for emigration, we find the revolt against state repression and the desire to escape (also from the grasp of emigrants’ families) to a more liberal environment as being as essential as the socio-economic reasons – the culture of mobility as a reflection of pessimistic attitudes (ch. 8, 9).

For Haller, lack of confidence is a central point, too: according to him, the population does not trust the tarnished promises of the development programs that have

been promulgated by state authorities in the face of widespread abuse of power, corruption, repression and discrimination and under a general mood of mistrust of others (ch. 5). This not only makes people averse to specific modernization projects, such as the port reconversion, but also includes a broader dissatisfaction with living conditions. Propagated visions of openness and tolerance contrast with widespread experiences of having a lack of hope and a lack of prospects for a “good life”, as well as encountering prudery, fundamentalism and foreign domination (ch. 2, 5).

However, spiritual aspects have the most prominent place in Haller’s book. By focusing on jinns (ǧnūn), he introduces “magical realism” and refers to the myths of Aīsha Qandisha, to the local spirit of Lalla Jmila and to animals (like goats and dogs) that also present gates to other worlds (ch. 3). This continues when he deals with demonic possession and exorcism, rituals and trance in Sufi brotherhoods, namely the local popular Ḥamādša order (ch. 4). Haller points to the increasing Salafism and Islamism in Tangier and its growing spiritual and political rivalry with the traditionally strong belief in ghosts, which is becoming increasingly discredited. On the other hand, the monarchy endeavors

to contain religious extremism not only by economic development, but also by revalorizing popular Islam. In a separate short essay, Haller briefly plunges into deep Tangier far from the central quarters in order to describe the ritual slaughtering on the occasion of Aīd El Kebir (ch. 6).

Social issues, especially familial changes, are a further focus of Ribas-Mateos’ publication. She points to the increasing plurality of family types in Tangier (ch. 9), including an incipient shift toward a “matriarchy of industrial life” with women as families’ main breadwinners, and parallel to that, male international migration leading to double-income households (ch. 6, 9). This goes hand in hand with an increasing number of celibate men and women, the mixing of sexes at industrial workplaces (ch. 6), the great importance of marrying abroad and the multi-country transnational dispersion of families – which results, in particular, in the emergence of patchwork economies and the multiplication of familial strategies (ch. 9). This includes high social vulnerability as is highlighted by the “children of sin:” illegitimate children who are released for clandestine adoption abroad while their unmarried mothers suffer from multiple exclusions (ch. 10).

Sex, lust, and angst are other central themes in Haller’s book (ch. 7). This is closely connected to Tangier as a long-reputed sensual and emotional “place of longing” for Western visitors. Locally, certain spiritual categories are often interlinked with indigenous concepts of gender roles. The discrediting and bad reputation of Sufi orders hinges not least on practices of ritual and sexual transgression, such as the strong participation by female adepts, the devotion to female ǧnūn, homosexuality and (same- and mixed-sex) marriages between human beings and spirits (ch. 4). However, traditional morality and tolerance are increasingly being superseded by more rigid, prudish and dangerous conditions, and revulsion at certain sexual practices is increasing amongst a new consumption-oriented middle class under conditions of growing Salafism (ch. 7). These investigations of sexual life join with Ribas-Mateos’ short delving into issues of transactional sex in Tangier (ch. 7).

All in all, both publications show that “it is worth rediscovering Tangier” (Haller), especially “from below”. Haller’s statement, that in the center of his book is the city’s population and how they deal with the changes, applies to both monographs. However, both authors underline their

Steffen Wippel

is a senior researcher at the Research Network “Re-Configurations. History, Remembrance and Transformation Processes in the Middle East and North Africa”, which is closely connected to the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS), Philipps-Universität Marburg (Germany). His current research project is on the urban and economic reconfigurations of Tangier as a transregional hub. At the same time, he is teaching as an associate professor (Privatdozent) at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. **email:** steffen.wippel@uni-marburg.de

incapacity – and lack of pretense – to behold the city’s complexity in its entirety. Rather, Tangier evokes the idea of a “kaleidoscope” (Ribas-Mateos). Consequently, they “highlight” (Haller) certain aspects that they deem important and to which access was possible, leading to a kind of “collage” (Ribas-Mateos). Haller, in particular, has adopted a plurality of writing styles – ranging from predominantly ethnographic essays to stricter analyses borrowed from social science and more poetic and belletristic presentations – reflecting the highly fractionalized city and the diverse topics approached. Both authors undertake anthropological self-reflection about the role of the researcher in his or her field and intersperse their analyses with methodological considerations. They focus on individual stories and individual strategies and emphasize the importance of the local. But, they show that actors in Tangier not only act locally and in accordance with local references, but also are embedded in wider translocal, transnational and transregional contexts and processes. Notably Ribas-Mateos’ insights demonstrate the range of “regionalizations” taking place in Tangier, which are linked to work in foreign firms, marriages in Spain, relatives in Europe and international migration. Haller extends this perspective to the spiritual sphere, namely

the transregional connections of mythical Aïsha Qandisha (ch. 3).

In accordance with his or her own interest, the reader will choose between the two books. While the books have some common themes, they are rather complementary and both worthwhile reading. Beyond a few inaccuracies in both publications, commenting on which is beyond the reach of this review essay, Haller’s monograph is more stringent and consistent and his book better structured in presenting his results, while Ribas-Mateos is a little more erratic and eclectic in her arguments – in particular, when we compare their presentations of the current macro-social and -economic transformations of Tangier and of methodological considerations. Haller intentionally went into the field rather “unprepared”, but demonstrates an extensive theoretical background and bibliography; in contrast, Ribas-Mateos almost does not refer to, for instance, the wide body of conceptual literature in interdisciplinary border studies, while the border is central to her argument. The time between Ribas-Mateos’ field research and the publication of her results was considerable and spans a period of important transformations in the city, while Haller managed to publish his more up-to-date insights from the field

in a rather short period of time. Finally, the price of Ribas-Mateos’ book is quite prohibitive, especially considering the poor printing quality. Many writing and typesetting mistakes pervade the book – including the title and the repeated displacement of end-of quotation marks between lines. As a final remark, both publications show the paramount importance of taking notice of non-English publications in social research and, in particular, if researchers want to gain multifarious insight in a case like the city of Tangier.

Notes

¹ An Arabic version of her book, *Natalyā Ribās Matiyūs*: “Tanja Boulevard du Détroit/ Ṭanġa Būlifār al-Būġāz”, has been published by the local publisher Litograph.

