



# The Globalization of the Poor

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Armelle Choplin  
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# The Globalization of the Poor

Far from Wall Street and Davos

Seuil  
La Republique des Idées

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# INTRODUCTION

## The discrete geography of globalization

As a phenomenon that links societies and spaces by means of the intensification of trade, globalization generates inequalities. This observation, made by numerous researchers and commentators, is difficult to contest—to the point of being considered a cliché in public debate today. A line of stark ideological difference quickly becomes apparent, even beyond the traditional opposition between the political left and right: those who are *for* and those who are *against* globalization. Within this opposition, the question of the inequalities engendered by globalization (and within that, the place assigned to the “poor”) is often explained in a simplistic way, whereby the poor are, by definition, the “victims” of the changes taking place on the planet.

But the poor shouldn’t be portrayed as a passive mass of humanity. On the contrary, this book aspires to show the largely unknown but decisive role which with even those on most modest

incomes play within the globalized economy. The circulation of goods shapes the lives and livelihoods of the poor, just as these individuals are in turn indispensable to globalization when that is seen as a new frontier for expanding markets and a source of capital accumulation.

It is crucial, therefore, in understanding today's world, to move away from the image of the poor as "excluded" from globalization. Because the poor are *deeply integrated* into the globalized world, to the point that globalization can only be understood by taking into account their ways of living, producing and consuming.

As part of a geographical approach, our analysis looks closely at those populations defined as poor, and who not only are subjected to globalization, but who are also agents of it and indeed call for it. This book shows how this integration transforms spaces and social groups generally perceived as peripheral. We have investigated globalization even in the most "discreet" spaces of the global world. This other view of globalization focuses on its less visible yet essential forms in interstitial spaces from Africa to China, through the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It is a dynamic globalization, far from Wall Street and Davos, Amazon and L'Oreal, yet nevertheless is

helping to build the world of tomorrow.

## **For and against globalization**

Opinions on globalization are generally well established. Neoliberals see globalization as an inevitable process, governed by private and multinational interests. According to this view, globalization represents the only access history can give the poor to the path of progress and, above all, to pursue their dreams of wealth: the accumulation and distribution of capital may be uneven between different spaces and societies, but they are the only solution to poverty. Thanks to the “invisible hand” of the globalized market, the poor can transform themselves into a global middle class. This vision would make the poor potential “beneficiaries” of globalization.

In contrast, anti-globalization activists advocate a return to national production and distribution networks, under the control of local communities or political authorities. This position encompasses political philosophies as different as the “degrowth” movement and today’s forms of economic and cultural nationalism. Due to the impact of ideological shifts in Europe and the United States - and the

notorious exclusion of Communist China – current tendencies would seem to favor the aspirations of the “de-globalization” movement.

For this reason, the word “globalization” has become a kind of catch-all that functions as a convenient scapegoat, allowing those who employ it to denounce oppressions of all kinds, whether of class or place. Following the weakening of the leftwing anti-globalization movement, these aspirations are now lending themselves to the populist temptations of conservatism, but also to more rampant forms of nationalism, which while remaining open to competition, operate according to principles of privilege rather than reciprocity (like Brexit in the United Kingdom or Donald Trump’s slogan *America First*).

In these philosophies *against* globalization, the place that the “poor” occupy is often that of “victims”. The poor are first of all considered as excluded and neglected by globalization. According to this understanding, globalization is a selective process that brings spaces and societies into competition with one another over resources which are substantial, but which are distributed in a concentrated and unequal manner. The exclusion of the poor would be characterized by their limited access to these resources.

Another, similar position denounces the unfair way in which



the poor are integrated into the process of globalization. Denouncing exploitation, especially of those working in dramatic conditions in off-site production plants – as evidenced by the collapse in 2013 of the garment factory building Rana Plaza in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, which killed more than 1,100 people. Another example would be the production and sales chain of luxury smartphones, from coltan extraction in the Congo, to assembly workshops in China, to retail resale in every city in the world.

## **The “poor” in globalization**

Our first objective is to see what the impact of globalization wherever it affects, solicits or engages groups defined as poor. Who are these “poor”? According to the World Bank, a person living on less than \$1.9 per day (defined as the new poverty line since 2015) is considered poor. While extreme poverty is declining globally, it continues to affect more than 12.5% of the world's population (i.e. 896 million people in 2012).

Just above the poverty line, those earning between \$2 and \$10 a day, the (very heterogeneous) “middle” class aspires to

professional stability through salaried labor rather than personal entrepreneurship, in order to devote more resources to health and education<sup>1</sup> but also to the purchase of consumer goods. The primary goal, on a daily basis, is to put food on the table, and this requires half to three quarters of their budget.<sup>2</sup> That is significant, especially in comparison to the richest countries, where such expenditure represents less than 15% of people's income. The poorest, however, also have money to invest in other sectors of consumption: housing, health, education, transportation, and so on.

This statistical data helps to understand the orders of magnitude at play, but is not sufficient to account for the protean and complex nature of poverty. From our point of view, poverty refers primarily to a relative material condition in a context of unequal distribution of resources, but poverty is also the product of an unequal social relationship.

Despite being by definition low income earners, the poor

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<sup>1</sup> A. V. Banerjee and E. Duflo, "What Is Middle Class About the Middle Classes Around the World?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 22, No. 2, 2008, pp. 3-41A.

<sup>2</sup> A. V. Banerjee and E. Duflo, "The Economic Lives of the Poor", *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 21, No. 1, 2007, pp. 141-167.

nevertheless constitute an *enormous mass of consumers* due to their sheer numbers on the planet. Their buying power is extremely uneven, but they are increasingly the target of potential market expansion. The weight of this potential market is difficult to quantify, hence the widespread and sometimes inaccurate use of a normative vocabulary which denigrates the economic practices of the poor: illicit, informal or illegal practices, stemming in particular from parallel markets. Such globalization exists in discrete spaces, but will play an essential part in a globalized future, in particular for the majority of the planet's poor.

This majority of the world's population, living on low incomes, experience globalization on the margins (or in the interstices) of major centers of capital accumulation. What are these discrete spaces? Far from tax havens and luxury hotels, and from the Frankfurt or Wall Street stock exchanges, these are places where transnational exchanges take place which are less visible than those envisaged by large international firms – which is to say, those of global cities, or involving massive flows of goods and capital.

It is principally within these discrete spaces that the poor can access and experiment with globalization. This does not imply that

these spaces are free from exploitation or from the expansion and accumulation of major economic interests. On the contrary, these spaces are positioned today as the “new frontiers of capital”, and the poor as new consumers to conquer. The intersection of different individuals and social classes, multiple territorial and cultural horizons... these are all spaces which will be challenged by the diversity and inequalities of the global world.

### **“De-westernizing” our perspective**

Our approach involves looking away from the West, or from the rich and hyperconnected spaces of the “South”. This change of perspective has become essential since the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) - large emerging powers whose economic and geopolitical importance has continued to grow throughout the 2000s and even after financial crisis of 2008.

We must move beyond a binary vision of the world - one which regards rich countries as competing against poor countries, or the “North” against the “South”, especially as the distinctions between these two categories have become increasingly porous. We must also

reckon with the tents of the homeless present in the Parisian urban landscape, and the Porsches on the streets of Lagos in Nigeria. Our approach implies a de-Westernized way of thinking, and therefore a shift in perspective towards spaces considered marginal, where social actors negotiate locally their incorporation into a globalized horizon.

If globalization is a question of inequality, it is not only a matter of classes; it is also a matter of spaces. The approach proposed here, developed by two geographers, has the advantage of highlighting issues of space, territory and scale, mobilizing spatialized methods and a manner of reading, narrating and interpreting reality.

Our approach draws on other human and social sciences that have already examined this question (sociology and anthropology in particular, but also political economy), hoping to add a spatial perspective to their contributions. Such a perspective will help to understand how globalization is both redefining and unfolding itself spatially, in order to access the marginal spaces populated by low-income inhabitants - and, in return, to see how these latter are affected by, enact, and influence the process of globalization.

## **Between the Mediterranean, Africa and China**

Our proposal is divided into three parts. We must first clarify what we mean by “globalization”, by distinguishing it from the French word “*mondialisation*,” in order to emphasize its territorial aspect. This is why we will focus on the issues of trade and exchange: the poor experience globalization up close when engaged with the market, which is why we have decided to describe the trajectories, networks and places of trade. That is why we need to know which globalization(s) we are talking about and, in scientific terms, to say which methodological tools we want to use to consider it.

These theoretical and methodological considerations will then be put to the test using localized examples, which (in an inductive and situated manner) will give a better grasp of the direct effect of globalization on the poor, and show how it integrates itself into the most remote spaces. The examples discussed here are significant in how they show the connection between these spaces and with the world, by way of material and human networks which are sometimes notable by their discretion - while nonetheless being at the heart of our future.

We propose to look first at the Mediterranean space. One of the historically most important examples of a globalized space, with its trader economy dating back to Greek Antiquity, the Mediterranean sphere has renewed its multiple networks and commercial nodes, many of which reach towards distant horizons. For the past four decades, trading centers in the Mediterranean area have been linked to Asia through the activities of small and large traders: Marseille and Cairo are connected to Yiwu in China.

The second case study concerns globalization in West Africa, a space too long considered as peripheral and "late" in its integration into the modern world. This space, which shows a strong demographic and economic dynamism, is now regarded by many as a promising market. We will see how discrete spaces (transport routes, cross-border markets, urban peripheries) serve as the basis for the circulation and marketing of products (cement, second-hand clothes, human hair) consumed massively by millions of "poor" people.

In the streets of Abidjan or Cotonou, huge billboards invite people to subscribe to the French television channel Canal+, bet on horse races in Europe, or transfer money via their mobile phone. Globalization is alive and well here, but the actors, processes and

spaces that underlie it are less so. Using examples taken from China, sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean region, beyond the question of whether globalization creates wealth or misery, we will concentrate on trying to understand how globalization affects the poor and the territories where they live.



# CHAPTER ONE

## A (not so) discrete globalization

The term “globalization” has become omnipresent, referring to the many different realities (whether appreciated or ignored) which are now part of our daily lives. As geographers, we have decided to use the term “globalization” – meaning “the highest level of the geographical scale”<sup>3</sup> - because it stresses the phenomenon’s territorial dimension (rather than concentrating on the cultural, political and technological consequences of globalization on societies).<sup>4</sup>

This section will allow us to clarify our approach, which differs notably from the typical binary perspectives and categories such as local/global, higher/lower, poor/rich, North/South, urban/rural, etc., which we find increasingly inapplicable.

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<sup>3</sup> C. Grataloup, *Mondialisation*, 2007, see the link: <http://www.hypergeo.eu/spip.php?article417> ; C. Grataloup, *Géohistoire de la mondialisation, le temps long du monde*, Paris, Armand Colin (2nd ed.), 2010.

<sup>4</sup> R. Ciavolella, E. Wittersheim, *Introduction à l'anthropologie politique*, Louvain-la-Neuve, De Boeck, 2016.

## **“Non-places” and “hyper-places”**

Let's begin with the term “place”. “More than a point, a name or a location: it *signifies*. It has a sense of place, an identity, a personality.”<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, a place represents space in all its materiality, but it also represents the relationship between the individuals and the groups that make up that space. The City in London, Silicon Valley in California, or Hong Kong in Asia are significant places of economic globalization, just as the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Great Wall of China represent touristic globalization. Equally, the Futian Market in Yiwu, Belsunce in Marseilles, Dubai souk in El Oued in Algeria, the Alaba International Market in Lagos, or Missèbo in Cotonou... these are all examples of places which, even if little known, are nevertheless essential for globalization.

Globalization could be designated by its “non-places”, (according to Marc Augé's intelligent proposal<sup>6</sup>) – the archetypes being airport hubs or gigantic shopping malls. The traveler (writes Augé) “is neither at their own home, nor yet at someone else's.” This

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<sup>5</sup> P. Clerc, see link: <http://www.hypergeo.eu/spip.php?article214#>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Augé, *Non-Lieux*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.

idea, however seductive, is no longer sufficient to describe the plurality of globalization's spatial forms.

Whereas globalization is obvious in an airport hub, it is by definition less so in a village on the Nile Delta. Yet it was precisely one of those villages that the anthropologist James Clifford described as an “airport waiting room”, after quoting a passage on Egypt by the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh. The author was leaving on a trip to the heart of the thousand-year-old Nilotic civilization when he discovered, not without surprise, that the inhabitants of the village where he was staying were made up of migrants, pilgrims and entrepreneurs. The myth of poor people being fixed in one place without any chance of escape was immediately dismantled, prompting Amitav Ghosh (and afterwards James Clifford) to reverse their understanding of the phenomenon.

If globalization is present everywhere, the question is worth asking again. Some twenty-five years after Marc Auge, for example, Michel Lussault is tempted to “see places everywhere” and use the term “hyper-places”<sup>7</sup> for those that distinguish themselves by offering

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<sup>7</sup> M. Lussault, *Hyper-Lieux. Les nouvelles géographies de la mondialisation*, Paris, Seuil, « La Couleur des idées », 2017

maximum mobility.

If all places are connected to one another, researchers face a methodological dilemma: in a world of intersecting spatial processes and abounding in “globalized spaces,” is it relevant to focus on any one specific place? On the face of it: yes, because many cities or small towns which are not widely known, yet are connected to each other by transnational trading networks, are powerful agents in the transformation of spaces.

It is therefore necessary to describe these places, to observe and measure and visit them - because not all places in the world have been the subject of a specific monograph - or to revisit them to record their changes, to provide orders of magnitude and to understand their relational function. Geographers can do this using a classic (and undoubtedly timeless) methodology - that of the monograph. But monographs are not always sufficient, as they do not capture the way each place is connected to other places. The analysis of relationships between places therefore takes precedence over the study of any one of them, at the risk of losing something of the specific local dimension.

## Roads as a backbone

Since the 1990s, faced with the emergence of a “world-system”<sup>8</sup> and with growing dissatisfaction with the monograph as a form useful in understanding it, voices were raised calling for a rethink of the social sciences’ methodological apparatus. Among those voices, the ethnologist George Marcus proposed the development of “multi-site ethnographic research”.<sup>9</sup> He suggested that we “follow the goods or people”, in order to understand the orders of magnitude and the discontinuities observable in any one specific place, but which generally unfold between several different sites. This approach can be particularly stimulating as long as certain methodological precautions are observed to exclude a superficial reading of the situation.

In recent years, research tracing the paths of material objects has met with undeniable success. This research all starts from a common point: the classic economic concept of a “global value

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<sup>8</sup> I. Wallerstein, *Le Système du monde du XV siècle à nos jours*, Paris, Flammarion, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> G. Marcus, “Ethnography in the World System: Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, No. 24, p. 95-117, 1995.

chain”,<sup>10</sup> which connects all stages and all sites of the manufacture of a product into a single network, from the supply of raw materials to consumption, through production and distribution, up to the final sale of the product.

But the economic approach, often somewhat abstract and applied to the strategies of multi- or transnational firms, is rarely appropriate when dealing with “other” economies.<sup>11</sup> The method must be adapted to consider the “value chain” as being the road infrastructure which acts as a space (informal or not) which facilitates trade, where various encounters occur, and where life itself unfurls. This is to say that not only the “chain” itself must be considered, but also what happens around it, even if that is all but invisible. These pathways are, by definition, dynamic spaces within which places are disassembled and reassembled, within changing territorial configurations.

Our attention can be focused on a specific portion of the chain or on the chain as a whole, in following an everyday object from

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<sup>10</sup> G. Gereffi, M. Korzeniewicz (ed.), *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> G. Machews, G. L. Ribeiro, C. Alba Vega (ed.), *Globalization from Below. The World's Other Economy*, London, Routledge, 2012.

the extraction sites of raw materials to consumers - as in the case of plastic sandals (flip-flops), t-shirts, *rickshaw* tricycles - in order to understand the stakes of a global market, or to deconstruct commonly held opinions (North vs South, rich vs poor, producers vs consumers, etc.).

This multi-site analysis is therefore not just about tracking the flows of goods or people, but about describing and understanding anchors, nodes, and links. This "horizontal" reading of the exchange, however, will benefit from being read alongside a "vertical" reading of different scales.

## **The scale and the network**

The form of globalization we describe concerns a plurality of actors and connections between places, at many different levels. As a result, the increased interaction between spatial forms which are static and those produced by the dynamics of globalization (industrial production systems, supranational institutions, diasporas...) raises a central question about the keys to a multi-scale reading of space in a globalized context.

Some authors have tried an empirical approach to this, describing the interconnections between the local and the global, taking as a starting point a localized and well-defined space - a market, a workshop, a factory - and then moving on to study this local place as part of a larger whole. This phenomenon is described by the anthropologist Charles Piot as “*remotely global*”,<sup>12</sup> a term he uses to describe a village in Togo, completely connected to the world despite its apparent remoteness, with reference to its transformations through constant exchanges between the local and the global, from the slave trade to the present day.

Shifting our perspective to a global analysis leads conversely to a loss of much local information. Information must be carefully selected, making it possible to understand how sites are connected to networks of exchange. When Alejandro Portes proposes the formula “globalization from below”, he is not directly referring to a scale-based reading, but nonetheless poses the question of how to perceive transnational spaces constructed out of the bonds made within communities themselves. In this way, he opens up a field of

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<sup>12</sup> C. Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.



potentially fertile research at the intersection of social and spatial readings of globalization. He writes:

In response to the processes of globalization, individuals have created communities that overlap national borders and, in a very concrete sense, are neither "here nor there", but here *and* there at the same time. The economic activities that underlie these communities are based precisely on the profitable differences created by the borders between them. In this respect, they operate no differently from multi-nationals, except that they emerge "from below" and their activities are mostly informal.<sup>13</sup>

Portes' analyzes, while programmatic, echo the research carried out in the Mediterranean metropolises. In France, Alain Tarrius has used the expression "globalization from below" to give his work on the new economic mobilizations of transnational Maghreb communities another perspective. He sees "real networks of nomadic entrepreneurs [...] leading a global underground economy"<sup>14</sup> - the

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<sup>13</sup> A. Portes, "La mondialisation par le bas. L'émergence des communautés transnationales", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 129, 1999, p. 15-25.

<sup>14</sup> A. Tarrius, *La Mondialisation par le bas. Les nouveaux nomades de l'économie souterraine*, Paris, Balland, 2002.

renewal of a kind of cosmopolitanism in places where the State “doesn’t expect them: in territories that escape its control and which it can’t manage.”

For both Portes and Tarrius, transnational communities are carriers of this other globalization - one built in the interstices of the global economy and driven by states and multinational companies: Latin Americans on the one hand, Maghrebians on the other, confronted with those parts of the North to which they emigrate, the United States or Western Europe. From there, these people trace out spaces of dense circulation between their new homes and the regions from which they come, weaving together multifaceted human, material, economic and symbolic links, based on their mastery of two spaces: here and there.

The research undertaken by Portes and Tarrius echoes the expression “*grassroots globalization*” as defined by Appadurai to characterize social forms based on “strategies, visions and horizons for globalization in the name of the poor”.<sup>15</sup> In the in the 2000s, by associating a social category which has broad and difficult-to-define

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<sup>15</sup> A. Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination”, *Public Culture*, No. 12 (1), 2000, p. 1-19.

contours (the poor) with a process that by definition transcends state borders (globalization), these authors opened up multiple fields of experimentation.

## **Selling to the poor**

In a speech made in 2010 before an audience of global decision-makers in the field of technological innovation, Sam Pitroda, then the Indian Minister in charge of Public Information and Innovation Infrastructures, declared: “We believe that the problems of the poor must be solved not only because India has one of the largest poor populations in the world, but also because we believe that our country has the talent to solve the problems of the poor around the world.”<sup>16</sup>

The statement is only of interest because Sam Pitroda, before becoming a minister, was an Indo-American businessman close to the Gandhi family, and the man responsible for equipping India with telecommunications networks (starting with public telephone booths),

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<sup>16</sup> See the link:

[http://www.lemonde.fr/technologies/article/2010/07/09/en-inde-innover-pour-faire-disparaitre-la-pauvrete\\_1386073\\_651865.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/technologies/article/2010/07/09/en-inde-innover-pour-faire-disparaitre-la-pauvrete_1386073_651865.html).

even in the most isolated and deprived rural areas, preparing the country for the widespread use of mobile telephony and its connection to the world.

Selling to the poor means identifying a market, or even creating it. Serious thought on this subject has abounded since the end of the 1990s. In coining the now-classic term “the poor market”, it is no coincidence that the marketing professor Coimbatore Krishnao Prahalad cited Sam Pitroda as an example. This entrepreneur-turned-minister’s winning bet involved a country – India - that has one third of all poor people in the world (nearly 400 million people), to whom he seeks to introduce a technological innovation rather than meeting their basic needs. But if it targets large numbers of people, innovation can be a source of income.

We are far removed from the pyramid of the capitalist system published in 1911 in *Industrial Worker*, the newspaper of the International Workers of the World (IWW), and from the metaphor of the “forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid” formulated by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. Prahalad extended its use for his theories, as part of an analysis of the lackluster

economic context of the early 2000s.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, a global economy that was gradually emerging out of the 1997 financial crisis, but whose growth remained weak and with increasing wealth gaps; on the other, the rapid growth of the economies of emerging countries—in particular the BRICS—creating a global consumer market of hundreds of millions of consumers. In order to connect these two sides of the world-economy, Prahalad has issued a challenge to multinational firms, urging them to pay attention not only to the upper third of the economic pyramid, but also to the market at the bottom of the pyramid (*the BOP market*), made up of poor populations who earn less than \$2,000 a year - but who make up a large majority of the world's population, at 4 billion people.

## **The “accountability” discourse**

Also, these “marginal” areas of the world—poor areas or areas populated by the poor where globalization is still discreet—offer incredible room for growth in the market economy. This market of the

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<sup>17</sup> C. K. Prahalad et A. Hammond, “Serving the World's Poor, Profitably”, *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 80, No. 9, 2002, pp. 48-59.

poor offers a new “*spatial fix*”, to quote Marxist geographer and anthropologist David Harvey<sup>18</sup> - that is to say, spaces which can be converted to capitalism, thus allowing for regeneration.

Since then, the project has been a huge success. It has spurred numerous studies and the implementation of projects by large global companies, tempted by this market full of promise and by the principle of enriching itself while helping the poor. The “accountability” discourse underlying development policy advocated by Prahalad is based on the principle which the economist Esther Duflo explains in the following manner<sup>19</sup>: “The role of the State is not to spend large amounts of money on poor people who are waiting passively for it. Its purpose should be to facilitate the emergence of functioning markets and a vibrant local democracy.”

This theory is reminiscent of the neoliberal Hernando de Soto, who portrays the poor as being microentrepreneurs without knowing it. According to the Peruvian economist, the world’s poor

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<sup>18</sup> D. Harvey, *Le Capitalisme contre le droit à la ville*, Paris, Ed. Amsterdam, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> E. Duflo, *La Politique de l'autonomie. Lutter contre la pauvreté (II)*, Paris, Seuil, 2015.

must be helped to enter the market economy.<sup>20</sup> However, many studies show that formalization is not enough to escape poverty, and that poor households are often microentrepreneurs only for lack of an alternative.

Esther Duflo recalls that for the poor, the “high level of initiative is experienced as something negative more often than as something desirable”, and that, when the lives of the poorest are compared with those of the middle classes in poor countries, “what appears to separate them is the fact that the latter have stable jobs”. That is why the concept of a BOP market has its detractors. Aneel Karnani speaks of a “marketing mirage” at the bottom of the pyramid, warning against those who “romanticize” the poor, and end up putting them in danger.<sup>21</sup>

Multinationals, however, see the poor as a market to conquer, while developing discourses and products that promote development (the two not being mutually exclusive). The leaders of the cement

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<sup>20</sup> H. de Soto, *Le Mystère du capital. Pourquoi le capitalisme triomphe en Occident et échoue partout ailleurs*, Paris, Flammarion, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> A. Karnani, “The Mirage of Marketing to the Bottom of the Pyramid”, *California Management Review*, No. 49 (4), 2007, pp. 90-111.

industry (to whom we will return to later) have understood the huge market represented by Africa's growing cities. They are producing significant amounts of cement to meet or fuel the demand for the many urban newcomers who need housing, increasing greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously promoting durable bricks made of local materials. This "market for the poor" throws up plenty of contradictions.

Far removed from the debates on development aid and access to the poor's access to consumer markets, the position of multinationals is already being challenged by the emergence of new product-and-supply-chain offers within emerging economies. A shift in perspective is therefore in order.

## **From the center to the margins**

Focusing on the poor and the way in which globalization is rooted in unexpected places, and moving away from the usual, highly visible forms and processes (large-scale international institutions, high finance...), requires us to change our viewpoint. We must move from the centers towards the margins, and settle in these variable



places represented by the borders between countries, the peripheries of urban territories, along roadways which lead to market towns that have sprung up in the middle of nowhere.

In other words, we must be prepared to go and observe unknown or ignored spaces - places that are “off the map”, to use Jennifer Robinson’s metaphor about cities in the global South.<sup>22</sup> Doing so means getting lost in the markets of Cairo, or driving down West African highways between Ghana and Nigeria, or taking a break to sample Arabic cuisine in restaurants in Yiwu, China, or staying in Düsseldorf during its plastic fair, or meeting wholesalers in Dubai, or observing port agents receive, clear and store containers in the Bolloré terminal in Abidjan...

Here we see globalization playing out more discreetly than elsewhere. Trading and making transactions require only a few words in broken English, French, Arabic or Chinese, and a calculator (“the truly common language we all understand,” a rich Indian importer of Chinese products for West Africa confided to me). The

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<sup>22</sup> J. Robinson, “Global and World Cities: a View From off the Map”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, No. 26.3, 2002, pp. 531-554.

provincialization of our perspective has made itself indispensable, because the classical divisions—North/South, developed/developing countries, rich countries/third world—are no longer sufficient to explain the complexity of the world.

The new routes taken by transnational exchanges, more maritime than terrestrial, account for this decentralization. They have been subject to profound changes over the past thirty years, and remain poorly known. At one end of these roads, we celebrate the emergence of one of these new centers, China, which exports manufactured products to the entire planet. At the other end, *made in China* has become particularly visible where it has made a recent breakthrough: in the poor market. Upstream are the gigantic supply centers that have proliferated throughout the Asian continent, and downstream is a market of nearly two billion consumers.

But between these two extremes, the highways and their effects, the marketplaces they connect, the plurality of providers animating them, the imaginations they stimulate, the stories they develop and the places that mark them remain all but unknown. Yet this is a major scientific issue. The result is a multiplication of observation points by means of which, under the direct or indirect

effect of global production networks, large traders and small entrepreneurs, *the transnational is constructed*.

This “unwesternized” geography is mapped in dotted lines, between places connected by roads forming a reticular space, and breaking down yesterday’s boundaries and large-scale ensembles. The “end of history,” evoked by Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s, celebrated the end of a bipolar world, and the expansion, in the unipolar world, of a political and economic model: the democratic liberal market.<sup>23</sup> It coincided with the announcement (made on numerous occasions) of an end to geography - itself a pretext for those who wished to talk of a “flattened” world.<sup>24</sup>

Today, while globalization has not flattened, homogenized, or even narrowed the world, the spatial aspect of geography can now be addressed in all its complexity, by considering the intensity of roads

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<sup>23</sup> F. Fukuyama, *La Fin de l'histoire et le dernier homme*, Paris, Flammarion, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> A nod to the English neologism of *Flat earthers*, formulated by S. Christopherson, H. Garretsen and R. Martin, “The World Is Not Flat: Putting Globalization in its Place”, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Econ Soc*, No. 1 (3), 2008, pp. 343-349, criticizing the proponents of the point of view put forward in the work of TL Friedman, *The World Is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-First Century*, London, Penguin, 2006.

and globalized networks and the (often urban) places that spring from them.

## **The urban globalization we don't see**

Globalization is shaking up many other limits, such as those of the city itself. It is also very difficult to say whether urbanization accompanies globalization or vice versa. Spatially, globalization is bound up with the now famous “global city”, a term we owe to Saskia Sassen. According to the sociologist, “the analysis of the global city highlights the fact that globalization is materialized by necessity in specific places and through institutional arrangements, many, if not all, of which are located at a national level.”<sup>25</sup>

There is something unique in this city, born from globalization, because it emerges “from the top down”. The need for capital flows to anchor themselves and for large companies to settle in specific locations, and thereby to concentrate on smaller slices of territories, creates an archipelago of global cities that are highly

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<sup>25</sup> S. Sassen, “Introduire le concept de ville globale”, *Raisons politiques*, No. 153/2004, pp. 9-23.

connected between each other. However, even if in the mind of its author the global city is constantly hemmed in by powerful dynamics emanating from “high” and “low” spheres, the use of this term creates a hierarchy of cities and towns, and leads us to consider only western cities.

The “global cities approach” has excluded a multitude of other cities because they are not considered of strategic importance within the global economy. However, in order to look at globalization in a new light, we must abandon any approach that would focus solely on the major Western metropolises. Far from New York, Tokyo and London, this new geography of international trade relies on a whole string of cities of different sizes.

In turn, the “*worlding elites*”<sup>26</sup> such as Shanghai, Dubai and Mumbai, which aspire to become global cities, have become major cities. These new centers of international trade are frequented by elites, traders and migrants from around the world, with intense connections woven between them. As postmodern symbols and models of success for certain emerging countries, these cities connect

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<sup>26</sup> A. Roy, A. Ong (ed.), *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, London, Blackwell, 2011.

different pathways and are traversed by both major and minor globalization players.

But these cosmopolitan metropolises, open to the world and limited in number, which prove so attractive to the young people in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, at least as much and sometimes much more than Paris, London or New York, should not take all our attention from other cities with less familiar names, but which nevertheless support networks and transnational pathways. These small towns and secondary urban areas, despite the lack of attention paid to them, are the places where the invisible majority of city dwellers live.<sup>27</sup>

Defined by UN Habitat as urban spaces of 100,000 to 500,000 inhabitants, these cities, as sources of not only roads and production facilities, but also—and most importantly—of business activities and consumption, help drive this discrete form of globalization.

Such globalization upsets certain pre-established urban

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<sup>27</sup> M. Hilgers, “Contribution à une anthropologie des villes secondaires”, *Cahiers d'études africaines*, No. 205.1, 2012, pp. 29-55.

hierarchies, and also reveals other urban forms which can hardly be described as cities. We prefer to speak of *city-less urbanization*. Some of the necessary forms (buildings, hangers...) are present, but not the other constitutive attributes that make up a city, such as centrality, density or urbanity.<sup>28</sup> Here, marketplaces spring up at a road junction in the middle of fields or the bush; warehouse areas and certain mercantile activities are found along a road corridor; or a construction site for residential housing or commercial offices is born under the auspices of a public-private partnership; elsewhere, small industrial production units are grafted onto a town's outlying areas. Elsewhere, private institutions (schools, clinics...) are set up in remote areas ahead of the arrival of the public services that are attributes of a city.

We must therefore be attentive to these architectures and urban forms, regardless of whether they are remarkable or extremely banal on the surface, but which are nevertheless fully integrated into global exchanges. Borders, crossroads, market places, bus stations, warehouses, villas and building sites are all places of production and consumption: trading, warehousing, symbol, retail and purchasing

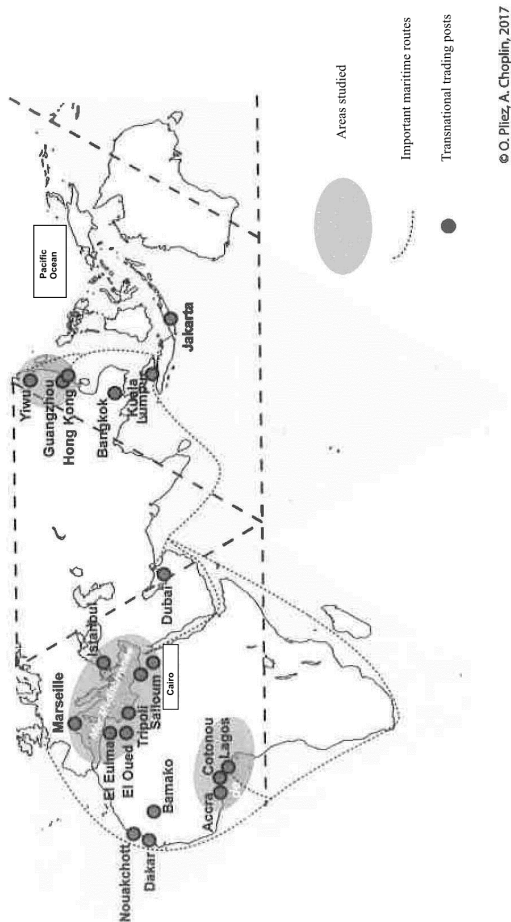
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<sup>28</sup> J. Levy, M. Lussault, *Dictionnaire de la géographie, de l'espace et des sociétés*, Paris, Belin (2nd ed.), 2013.

help structure global routes and transnational networks.



Map 1: Areas mentioned in this book



# **CHAPTER TWO**

## **Globalized spaces in the Mediterranean**

Negotiating, clearing customs, warehousing, embarking or disembarking goods, crossing borders: all these things are done in specific places. In other words, without fixed anchors, there can be no mobility. This is a first important element in understanding the spatial mechanism that makes this globalization possible. To the synchrony of movement (where and how does it happen at a given moment?), therefore, a diachronic (or even an a-chronic) aspect responds: why there, right now, and not elsewhere, at another time?

This chapter addresses this issue inductively, by analyzing two cases of historical construction of transnational trade routes, as well as the spatial and social forms these exchanges produce, in spaces which would appear seemingly peripheral to any major intersections of transnational flows. We will start our study with Algerian markets for consumer goods, analyzed over a thirty-year period, together with their connections to Marseille, and then on to China. We will then focus on the Chinese jeans sold on the “poor people’s market” in

Cairo, while passing across Libyan borders.

The Mediterranean area is an excellent place to observe and analyze the genesis of this form of globalization. Greek antiquity gave rise to the *emporium*, a trading post connected to many other posts in various parts of the globe,<sup>29</sup> and which we now find in different forms today. They make up an urban network that has become denser over the centuries, starting from Greece, then in the Roman Empire, despite the increasing distances separating them. For the modern era, Fernand Braudel has emphasized that the crucible of the Mediterranean civilization was truly intelligible only by considering a “Greater Mediterranean.”<sup>30</sup> The one that interests us is emerging in a more recent historical site: decolonization.

These Mediterranean roads, both from Algeria as well as Egypt, are now connected to Asian trading posts where goods are produced. We will try to understand how these spaces of exchange

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<sup>29</sup> B. Bertonecello and S. Bredeloup, “De Hong Kong à Guangzhou, de nouveaux ‘comptoirs’ africains s’organisent”, *Perspectives chinoises*, No. 1, 2007, available at <http://perspectiveschinoises.revues.org/2053>.

<sup>30</sup> F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris, Armand Colin ; Le Livre de Poche, re-ed. (3 volumes), 1990.

have been constructed and how they construct themselves, how they shift over time from one place to another, and how a counter economy is established, whose sections (originally separate) gradually link up with Asia to form the pathways of a transcontinental exchange at an unprecedented level of intensity.

## **Belsunce, or the Marseille trading post**

While it is today commonplace to encounter Algerian traders in China, they (or rather their elders) were mostly present in Europe in the 1980s, or on the borders of Libya.

Algeria is emblematic of the redeployment of merchant supply networks in the Mediterranean context. We can sketch a chronology of the visits to the markets where Algerian importers have been sourcing their goods for thirty years. A first transnational road can be seen, anchored to two main supply sources: from the colonial legacy of France on one hand, and from Libya as a result of the 1973 oil crisis—a long-term cause of economic crisis for oil-importing countries and an unprecedented economic boom for exporting countries.

Between the Saint-Charles train station and the Joliette port, the Belsunce district in Marseille has been known as the gateway to Marseille for generations of Mediterranean migrants. Armenians and Italians, most of whom arrived in the 1930s, gave way to Sephardic wholesalers in the 1950s, and to Maghrebi immigrants starting in the 1970s. Thereafter, Belsunce became a first contact point for the city's "Arab quarter", designated as the arrival point for the wave of migration stemming directly from the colonization of the Maghreb by France. However, this static image poorly translates the co-operative space that Belsunce represented at that period of time.

The pioneering work of the sociologist Alain Tarrius describes a neighborhood where "newcomers of varying degrees of legality" lived or passed through; a few families of traders who had been very well established for the last twenty years; a small group of "international entrepreneurs" living in the area, but mobilizing thousands of workers in the neighborhood; "*pied-noirs* from different Maghreb nations", owners of hotels that host the buyers, facilitate the conversion of currencies, offer discreet trading venues; and finally the customers themselves, some 400,000 to 500,000 people a year, usually immigrants living in a European or Maghreb country coming

for a few days to France to purchase goods, mainly cars, textiles, or electrical and electronic equipment.<sup>31</sup>

At that point in time, Belsunce was at the peak of its trading post function, one of the Mediterranean crucibles of a transnational trading network whose operators were inventing new entrepreneurial practices in cities--“like a network of circuits, topographical and social, highly connected,” according to Alain Tarrius.

Make no mistake: immigrants did not turn into transnational entrepreneurs in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s. It would be a mistake to consider “that transnationalism became the primary form of immigrants’ political and economic adaptation.”<sup>32</sup> However, these forms of entrepreneurship differed from those associated with the so-called “ethnic” forms of trade, that is, the trade of community goods (groceries, services) for immigrant communities.

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<sup>31</sup> A. Tarrius, “Naissance d'une colonie : un comptoir commercial à Marseille”, *Revue européenne de migrations internationales*, vol. 11, No. 1, “Marseille et ses étrangers”, 1995, pp. 21-52.

<sup>32</sup> S. Mazzella, “Belsunce, laboratoire urbain de la migration ? (critical note) », *Terrains & travaux*, 2, No. 7, 2004, pp. 19-24.

## **The Algerian shopping-bag generation**

The transnational activities of these immigrant communities, suffering from unemployment in a deindustrialized France that offers fewer and fewer unskilled or unqualified jobs, are more like a specific economic niche playing on price or income differentials or borders, within an ever broader “circulatory territory”.

Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, the “shopping bag carriers” set off on shuttles between the big port cities of Southern Europe such as Marseille, Genoa and Barcelona, and the cities of the Maghreb where they resell the goods. The bazaar economy, in the spirit of the works of Clifford Geertz on the Moroccan market of Sefrou, extends the commercial practices based on interpersonal relations to the Mediterranean scale.<sup>33</sup>

On the northern shore of the Mediterranean, a whole supply system was being built up to meet a growing demand for consumer products. At first operating at the regional and then national level, it quickly turned into a European affair. It created supply chains that

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<sup>33</sup> C. Geertz, “The Bazaar Economy”, *American Economic Review*, No. 68, 1978, pp. 28-32.

brought together, for example, the refurbishment, trading and transit of used vehicles and spare parts.

On the southern shore, particularly in Algeria, in a context of import liberalization, the emerging demand for consumer markets was such that it was estimated that *trabendo* (slang contraction of the Spanish word *contrabando*, used in the Maghreb to designate the import of goods without a customs declaration) provided nearly 80% of the needs of the food economy at the end of the 1980s.<sup>34</sup> Its scale stimulated the expansion of supply chains that relied on a growing number of supply sources, including wholesale, semi-wholesale and retail resale sites that irrigated every Maghreb state.

In the 1990s, the transition from “shopping bag to transport container”<sup>35</sup> led the changes in nature and volume of these transnational business activities. With them emerged new operators and new trading spaces. The figure of the “Trabendist” carrying his or her shopping bag, born in a post-Fordist context, gave way to the

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<sup>34</sup> M. Péraldi, “Le ‘commerce migratoire’ euroméditerranéen”, *Politique étrangère*, No. 4, 2016, pp. 35-46.

<sup>35</sup> M. Péraldi (dir.), *Cabas et conteneurs. Activités marchandes informelles et réseaux migrants transfrontaliers*, Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Maison-neuve & Larose et MMSH, 2001.



transnational entrepreneur. In France, which made its visa requirements more difficult starting in 1985, the Marseille trading post quickly lost its central role to Istanbul, which became the main source of supply in the Mediterranean. At the same time, in the Maghreb, activities related to transnational trade were structured and concentrated in the east, notably in El Oued and, later, El Eulma in Algeria.

## **From the Libya souk to the Dubai souk**

A very different trajectory gave rise to the structuring of transnational commercial arrangements on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, far removed from the problems associated with the disintegration of relations between metropolises and their former colonial territories. In order to understand its genesis, we need to shift to another time frame, one in which 1973 did not refer to a crisis but to an economic boom for oil-exporting countries, which created new flows of people and goods, outside the orbit of North-South relations.

We turn first to Tozeur, in southern Tunisia, in 2015. Ahmed, a hotel receptionist, explains that it was thanks to the Dubai souk of

El Oued that he was able to offer his future wife a beautiful wedding gift as well as a honeymoon. Seeing our quizzical look, he went on:

We had made a list of purchases to equip our future home. I went to Tunis and El Oued, Algeria, to see how much it would cost me. By buying everything in El Oued, I paid half as much as I would have otherwise. So that's where we bought everything, and with what was left of money, we went on a honeymoon trip to Istanbul.

With its postcard landscape in the middle of the sea of sand that is the Great Eastern Erg, described by Isabelle Eberhardt as the “city of a thousand cupolas”, El Oued's historic city is structured classically around the central mosque and its souk, as is the case in most of the medinas of the Arab world.

But, in the 1970s and 1980s, the agglomeration spread rapidly under the effect of the population boom that became even more amplified the 1990s, with the arrival of many Algerians coming from regions further north, which were suffering from a civil war. El Oued went on to become one of the most important border market places in the Maghreb, thanks to the emergence of a consumer market in the Saharan region of the Souf, of which it is the main town.

The historic main market is nicknamed “Libya souk” (the Libyan market), because El Oued has been directly connected to the Libyan market since the 1970s, the principle source of subsidized manufactured goods in Libya, which are then smuggled for resale at low prices throughout the Maghreb.

The initial site of the El Oued market, centrally-located but difficult for any large number of vehicles to access, soon became too narrow to accommodate the hundreds of collective taxis and vans coming every Friday from Algerian cities located several hours away. During the 1990s, the slowdown in imports from Libya was largely offset by the rise of the use of transport containers in Algerian ports; semi-trailers that could carry ever larger quantities of goods. Supply locations were diversified, and this reinforced the centrality of the El Oued’s Libya souk: garments and household appliances came from the ports of Tunis and Tripoli, but also from Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), Alexandria (Egypt) and from Istanbul (Turkey), directly or through the Algerian markets of Tébessa or Tadjenanet.

The municipality then decided to build a peripheral market, near the main axes connecting El Oued to Tunisia and northern Algeria. Opened in 1998, it includes wholesale and retail food (dates,

vegetables and livestock) and non-food items (imported consumer goods and clothing). It was quickly dubbed “Libya souk”, marking the shift of commercial functions from the center to the outskirts of El Oued. Divided into specialized sectors, it consists of permanent shops that are rented or sold to traders.

The construction of a peripheral market was not only functional however. It also revealed the competition between local public and private actors for the construction of markets in El Oued, and, consequently, for the capture of a portion of the windfall induced by the commercial activities that arrive or transit through the city. The dynamism of the latter contrasts with the low level of local tax revenues, since barely one in five taxpayers pays the property tax.

But the failure of the new Libya souk was clear, because it was little frequented by the inhabitants of Souf, except on Fridays, the latter preferring the old central market. The municipal authorities then decided to create a new market in the center, for an amount that kept going up because of how many requests there had been.

The contrast between the Libya souk, a new market created by a public initiative and not particularly dynamic, and the old market, created out of private initiative and with renewed dynamism, is

particularly striking. Paradoxically, it is the oldest of the two that now bears the name of Dubai souk, a sign of El Oued's insertion into new transnational trading circuits.

It is a good example of the transactions between public and private actors, and between formal and informal trades. El Oued's success is based on the combination of these two commercial activities, since, despite the illegal nature of the passages of subsidized goods from Libya, it is their trade which feeds the commercial expansion of the city by creating demand for the construction of the necessary infrastructures.

Markets like those of El Oued, which arise informally, have become key issues for local urban governance (market-cities) and for regional economic development (especially in marginal regions within states), which force public authorities and actors in the economic sphere to constantly negotiate between urban development and the insertion of markets into networks. This form of globalization is certainly not that of global cities, but it nevertheless touches all consumer markets, using channels that are often difficult to identify.

## **Chinese jeans on the streets of Cairo**<sup>36</sup>

Blue jeans are popular with teenagers in urban Egypt, as they are with teenagers around the world. Such clothes are therefore a common commodity in the stalls of the shopping districts of Cairo. Made in China, they move through certain channels--sometimes legal, sometimes illegal, but generally tolerated—in order to reach the most modest consumer markets, doing so with the aim of lowering sales prices sufficiently to appeal to a large-sized market, that of “the poor.”

Retracing the route taken by these goods leads us to places not commonly associated with the idea of globalization. Starting from the multimillionaire metropolis of Cairo, we return to the village of Sallum, located on the Libya-Egypt border, inhabited by Bedouins, before moving on to Tripoli, the capital of Libya, considered a “rogue state” on the international scene before its rehabilitation in the early 2000s and the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011.

The “bottom up” routes of globalization are dotted with

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<sup>36</sup> The following sections are part of the article “Des jeans chinois dans les rues du Caire, ou les espaces discrets de la mondialisation (*Chinese jeans on the streets of Cairo, or the discrete spaces of globalization*)” (<https://mappemonde-archive.mgm.fr/num16/articles/art07404.html>), updated.

anchor points - borders, industrial zones, shopping centers, markets, ports - which vary according to the social, economic and geopolitical contexts they encounter in the Middle East and North Africa.

**TABLE I**

**The socio-economic pyramid of the markets in Arab countries (2013)**

States	<i>Population (in millions)</i>	Top of the pyramid (%)	Middle class (%)	Bottom of the pyramid (%)	Total (%)
Algeria	36	17	55	28	100
Saudi Arabia	28.2	13	65	22	100
Bahrain	1.1	7	60	33	100
Egypt	80.4	13	34	53	100
United Arab Emirates	5.4	11	60	29	100
Jordan	6.3	20	41	39	100
Kuwait	3.7	22	57	21	100
Lebanon	4	10	60	30	100
Libya	6.5	15	35	50	100
Morocco	32.2	13	32	55	100
Mauritania	3.5	3	30	67	100
Oman	3.1	6	63	3i	100
Qatar	1.8	8	70	22	100
Sudan	32.7	8	46	46	100
Syria	20.8	3	57	40	100
Tunisia	10.7	22	52	26	100
Yemen	25.1	4	60	36	100
Total	301.5	11.47	51.59	36.9	100

Source: <https://hbr.org/2013/05/understanding-the-arab-consumer>.

Egypt's 80 million inhabitants in 2013 - a quarter of the total population of the Arab world - account for more than half of the market at the bottom of the pyramid (BOP). Consequently, the shopping streets of downtown Cairo are the destination for goods sold to a market of several million customers looking for low-priced products.

Each social class has its privileged places of consumption. In the mid-2000s, the sale of clothes in Egypt was already organized into extremely compartmentalized markets, each associated with specific places: consumers of quality products, the richest of whom bought their products in the major European capitals, as well as in Dubai, Istanbul or Beirut. More recently, commercial malls have developed on the model of those now famous in the Gulf states, near the *gated communities* that have sprung up on the outskirts of Cairo. Cairo's middle class (about 34 percent of the nation's population in 2013) shops for clothing in Cairo's downtown shops.

It has been estimated that more than 40 million people are employed in the huge consumer market for very low-priced clothing, whether second-hand clothing, or, increasingly, Asian textiles, usually Chinese. This clientele frequents the innumerable markets of Cairo;



some of these markets have a particular story, the memory of which lives on in their names: the “Gaza souk,” so-called because of the Palestinians in this enclave who opened a busy market near the Port Said Free Zone before it was moved to the Egyptian capital; or the Haret el Yehoud (the Jewish quarter) in the old center of the metropolis, whose inhabitants had left Egypt for Israel before being replaced by new families of local traders, now deeply involved in merchandise importation networks.

Egypt joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, becoming thereby a “good student” as regards the global agenda of liberalizing trade. This had two consequences: on the one hand, this economic openness rendered obsolete the free trade zones set up during *YInfitah* (opening), promoted under the presidency of Anwar Sadat, starting with the most famous example, Port-Said, at the mouth of the Suez Canal on the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Egypt’s traditional partners gradually lost their leading position in favor of China, Egypt’s third most important economic partner in 2009, behind the European Union and the United States.

By opening up economically, Egypt also exposed its most fragile sectors, particularly its textile industry. Despite the reputation

of the country's cotton, the poor quality of local clothing production does not satisfy consumers, particularly the most modest, who are driving the increasing demand for Chinese products, which are of higher quality at lower prices. In order to stem the decline in local production, and despite the liberalization of trade between those countries who signed the WTO multifiber agreements (which eliminated textile quotas between 2002 and 2004), Egyptian customs duties on clothing imports have varied from 12% to 40%, depending on the product.

These duties increased the price of imported goods on the Egyptian market to levels too high for the masses. Reaching the poor market requires the use of trading chains that differ greatly depending on the target market. Hakim is a large Cairo importer who runs a company importing hydraulic machine tools. He frequently sets the central position of his company against the multitude of small tool retailers in the neighborhood where his premises are located. His father, he says, used to joke that "if we put pink-colored toilets in the window of their showroom, the whole neighborhood would sell them too."

His approach involves his team visiting trade fairs and

factories, whereas the “small enterprises” are happy to visit the websites of Chinese factories. He derides those who go to specifically created trading forums, whom he meets at the Chinese consulate in the Egyptian capital. “They show up with the savings of an entire village, before taking a cheap flight to buy something to fill a container.” In sum, he concludes, “Egyptian importers are of two types: a few big fish and a lot of little ones.”

Some of these “little fish” find themselves implicated in contraband supply chains run by large-scale operators based in Cairo and Alexandria, who have organized themselves to receive non-quota goods, unloaded in Libya and transported to the border town of Sallum, before being sold to the rest of the country.

## **Sallum, a border warehouse between Libya and Egypt**

Chinese jeans pass through Sallum on their way to be sold the streets of Cairo. Sallum is very far from what one might call a global trading hub, but this village located in a vast *no man's land* in the steppe that separates Libya from Egypt, populated by Bedouins, is nevertheless a necessary link in the chain of transnational trade.

Because Sallum is located in a border region, it has become a necessary anchor in global trade flows, like El Oued on the border between Algeria and Libya.

Located in an extremely remote part of Egypt, Sallum is a stopover point for hundreds of thousands of people on their way from Egypt and Libya, being the only border crossing point open between the two states, where thousands of travelers stop daily for a few hours or a night. Daily passenger traffic was estimated at 5,000 people per day in the mid-1990s. Over the course of the day, Egyptian migrants who have spent the day working in Libya stop in the village to buy phone cards or cigarettes, or to have a quick meal in a restaurant before heading back home.

The dynamism of this commercial axis is such that many activities accompany its growth, multiplying the employment opportunities for those the Bedouins call the residents (*Mouquimin*). Egyptians from Alexandria and the Nile Delta come to work in construction in Sallum or in the many stores serving travelers: cooking, boutique shops, hotels, etc. Many of them also come to sell vegetables grown in the Nile Delta to feed a village with 4,000 residents (according to official statistics, but the real number is

probably twice as high).

However, even if there is a long history of substantial emigration from Egypt to Libya (between 750,000 and 1,500,000 people, depending on the situation in Libya), the town's street life owes as much to the continuous flow of travelers leaving or arriving from Libya as it does to the presence of the many residents involved in the border economy, including the officials who control it and the smugglers who cross it daily.

Egyptian freight forwarders who have unloaded containers of clothing or small electronic devices in Libyan ports come to receive them in Sallum. For this, they employ porters, who call themselves smugglers. They enter Libya at dawn to empty the containers of their contents. They then return to Egypt, bypassing the border posts, to load the goods onto sheeted taxis belonging to Bedouins. They make as many trips on foot as necessary on both sides of the border.

At the end of the afternoon, when all the cargo has passed over to the Egyptian side, they go down towards Sallum, 12 kilometers away, to load the packages into the warehouses on the main street. These warehouses look like any of the many shops in the streets, except that they consist only of shelves and a counter, in front

of which the carriers line up to drop off their packages. These goods remain on the shelves for only a short time, before the freight forwarders pick up their orders and load them onto trucks to take to their partners, the wholesalers in Alexandria and Cairo, who then go on to sell them on the Egyptian market.

For the inhabitants of Sallum, the smuggling of goods and people constitutes a source of income that makes up for the lack of investment from public authorities, which can be seen in the locality's commercial equipment. In the mid-2000s, the main street of Sallum was a very busy thoroughfare lined with about 230 businesses along its 900 meters. These businesses can be categorized into four groups: cafés (10%), restaurants (10%), telephony shops (15%), and stalls of imported products and warehouses (15%). There are also grocery stores and even seven hotels. A veritable construction boom has taken place there, as can be seen in the appearance of villas and stores selling household appliances.

The paradoxes of such banal, urban-based production are obvious in this economic development which is linked to illegal but tolerated activity, which gives rise to an increasingly active public authority, which in turn helps stimulate Sallum's growth. In less than

five years, public facilities have proliferated along the main street: a group of school buildings, a middle school and a high school, a desalination plant, a telephone exchange, a military hospital open to civilians, a new electricity generation plant, collective housing for civil servants and a promenade inaugurated on the occasion of the solar eclipse of March 2004.

The highway to Cairo leads through Sallum and its twin village on the other side of the border, M'saad, where the containers are emptied of their goods. Despite their economic vitality, both towns represent only minor transloading points. Upstream from M'saad, Rachid Street in Tripoli operates as a warehouse where goods imported from Dubai and Asian trading desks are received before returning to Egypt and all of Libya's other neighbors.

## **The port districts of Tripoli**

About a twenty-hour drive from Sallum, Tripoli, the capital of the Libyan state, returned, during the last years of Gaddafi's regime, to its historic role as a Mediterranean commercial port, thanks to the low taxes on imported goods and to its position as a crossroads

of migratory flows from the Sahel (Sudan, Chad and Niger) and North Africa (Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt).

The Libyan government, rich in oil revenues, has always pursued highly interventionist economic policies, notably by controlling the importation of consumer goods. From the 1970s until the mid-1980s Oil Counter-Shock, the regime's prosperity allowed it to redistribute these products to the people at very low prices by means of its subsidy policies. This led to a very strong differential between the prices fixed on Libyan territory and those in neighboring countries, to the point where networks smuggling subsidized products soon emerged, resulting in the creation of dozens of "Libya souks".

The fall in oil prices, combined with the international sanctions imposed on Libya for its aggressive foreign policy between 1982 and 1999, reduced the intensity of this traffic for a time. In order to respond to the deterioration of the country's economic situation, which was linked to the fall in income from rents and to the collapse of the national currency (the Libyan dinar), the Libyan government undertook a massive economic liberalization process, which led to a drop in subsidies and the maintenance of low tax rates.

Libya went from an international pariah to a platform for the



re-export of imported goods, at the crossroads of transnational value chains connected to the wholesale markets of Istanbul, Saudi Arabia, Dubai and East Asia. In a context of strong demand from emerging consumer markets in the region, those people - Libyan and foreign - involved in the exportation of subsidized products switched to wholesale and import activities. The port districts of Tripoli were transformed into large warehousing and trading areas frequented by traders coming mainly from the Maghreb, Egypt, Chad and Sudan, who found accommodation in a wide range of hotels located in the area. In the immediate vicinity, the Medina of Tripoli became the temporary homes of thousands of Sub-Saharan, North African or Middle Eastern migrants finding employment in the multitude of small jobs created by commercial activities: parcel handling, sewing, hotel maintenance, etc.

This organization was similar to that of Belsunce at its peak, although many elements distinguished it: an ever more porous relationship between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal. In turn, the road leading from Cairo to Tripoli fell into total disrepair in the 2000s, on account of the disintegration of the Libyan regime and the civil war after 2011, but also following drastic changes

to the maritime routes used for merchant trade.

## **Dubai, Middle East trading post**

As Algerian traders interviewed in China told us, “when we saw Emiratis and Iranians in Istanbul, we realized that we hadn’t yet reached the source”. In the 1990s, the destinations diversified and the flow of “suitcase” merchants intensified. Marketplaces emerged in places where other roads converged, often ancient, sometimes recent, as a result of geopolitical upheavals induced by the disintegration of the USSR and the 9/11 attacks in 2001, after which Arab traders said they no longer felt welcome in the US and Europe.

In this context, Istanbul offers a different scale and a new geographical context. Far from Belsunce and legacies of the colonial past, the Maghrebians crossed paths with nationals of the former USSR and the Middle East. In the Arabian Gulf, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates or Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, the “little worlds” of Istanbul worked alongside Asian nationals, including Iranians and Indians, but also Africans (Somalis, Sudanese or Kenyans) and pilgrim traders. Here, the close link between Islam and trade was more

visible and opened territorial horizons not often seen in the Western Mediterranean.

Nevertheless, since the 2007 financial crisis, Dubai is no longer what it was. Heavily indebted, it was "redeemed" by her opulent neighbor, Abu Dhabi. The dreams the reigning family—the Al Maktoum—had for this emirate were not enough to make Dubai a permanent representative of the intersection of two models: the Asian city-states of Hong Kong and Singapore, and “global cities” such as New York or London.

“The Dubai stage of capitalism” analyzed by Mike Davis lasted only a short period, quickly raising questions about its future and the very meaning of the rapid birth of such a place.<sup>37</sup> However, the importance of the Gulf trading posts in trade between Africa and Asia cannot be doubted. Dubai entrepreneurs first developed the role of importing and re-exporting from Asia on a regional scale (to the Gulf, Iran, and Iraq in particular) and then on a continental scale (the Arab world and Africa).

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<sup>37</sup> M. Davis, *Le Stade Dubaï du capitalisme*, Paris, Les Prairies ordinaires, 2007; and M. Lavergne, “Dubaï, utile ou futile ? Portrait d'une ville rêvée à l'heure de la crise”, *Herodote*, No. 133, 2009, pp. 32-57.

This influence has resulted in the multiplication of links with the main industrial districts of China, and the establishment of a growing number of emirate trading companies in Yiwu and other Southeast Asian trading cities, to deal with wholesale markets evolving towards international trade. The Dubai networks became denser and more diversified as the actors animating it developed their networks and strategies, transforming the stopover and the air hub into a real trading center.

In order to appreciate its relevance, one must first abandon the flashy image of Dubai—that of skyscrapers, glittering shopping malls and gated communities—to return to the heart of the city, between Musalla, Deira and 20<sup>th</sup> Street, for example, where many *China malls* (*China shoe center*, *China commodity center*, *Chinese souq*, etc.) are concentrated. They consist mainly of showrooms (exhibition halls) which display the products manufactured by this or that company, for wholesalers visiting the facilities. These *China malls* make *made in China* products visible. Instead of the brand name, which means little to buyers, they refer to a toponym marker of space.

In Dubai, the most advanced part of Deira on the sea, Al Ras,

consists of avenues running between blocks of housing, warehouses and businesses, and which are crisscrossed by small pedestrian streets. Tourism and the wholesale trade are all but intertwined, despite their distinct practices and clienteles. The space taken up by tourism is significant, and is artificialized with oriental trappings (such souks for gold, spices, and textiles). The oriental shopping area is based on a pedestrian model, crossing the various souks and continuing north to the Riqqa hotel zone, towards the airport, then stretching east to the ferries and the tourist riverbanks of Bur Dubai.

Old Deira's showrooms, on the other hand, are boutiques exclusively dedicated to wholesale offerings of small items (food products, machine tools, textiles, bazaar items), and are devoid of any fancy frills. Shops close around 6 pm and parcels of goods are placed at the corners of the streets. Their loaders wait and trucks pass by to pick them up.

Along the banks of Deira, contraband goods from Iran are stacked in boxes, before being loaded on dhows that shuttle through the Strait of Hormuz. Trade with Iran has helped develop long-distance commercial activities.

## **The Algeria-Dubai-China axis**

Nasr Square is one of those places where many trading service companies are concentrated. These companies act as a link between Asian sellers and buyers around the world. Ahmed owns one such companies. He is an engineer educated in France and Algeria from the city of El Eulma. He has been working in Algeria for the last few years. In 1997, in the middle of the country's civil war, he decided to leave his post and Algeria, after seeing bodies with their throats cut along the road that leads to Setif. He left for Dubai, where there were a good number of traders. Able to speak Arabic, English and French, he was employed by an Iranian owner of a sea freight service agency.

In the early 1990s, El Eulma created its Dubai souk, taking advantage of the end of the monopoly on foreign trade held by the Algerian state. In fewer than ten years, 34,000 private import-export companies were set up in the country, and the city of El Eulma alone accounted for almost 10% of them. Located near the new bus terminal, the market would first annex a suburban subdivision, before expanding to two new neighborhoods. First specialized in hardware

and drugstore items, it then went on within a few years to become the main Algerian center, in addition to its original specialization in furniture, household items, interior decoration, toys, as well as home appliances, mobile telephony and small computers.

At that time, most Algerian importers were still visiting Istanbul, with Dubai considered as the products' actual source. Algerians can't transport them directly to Algeria because of shipping route constraints, but prices are so low that the first traders shipped products according to two criteria: the proximity of ports and the "fluidity" of the sectors in question. The products arrive in Morocco, Libya or Egypt, from where they can be transported to Algeria by lucrative smuggling channels. "If we lost a container, for example on the road across Libya, it didn't matter that much because the profit margins were so high."

When Ahmed moved to the emirate, Tut Shipping had launched the first direct container line between Dubai and Algiers only two years previously, in 1995. Algerian importers who frequent the market places of Morocco, France and Turkey quickly moved to this new supply hub. It was the beginning of Dubai's golden age for early buyers. Their profits reached 200 to 300% on a container

because, “in Algeria, people have money to spend, but there’s not enough supply.” Back then, there were only about ten importers to supply the wholesalers, who sold the goods through their networks of semi-wholesalers to supply their national markets.

Ahmed opened his own office in Dubai in 2003, followed by two others in China, Guangzhou (Canton) and Yiwu, where many Arab importers were looking for cheap products. In doing so, he was following the trail laid by the trade’s pioneers, flying to Hong Kong to prospect the Chinese market and visiting the Canton Fair in 1998-1999, before moving on to Yiwu, where he was one of the first Algerians. Each market had its own specificity, however: from Guangzhou, Ahmed supplied them with ceramics, furniture and electronics. In Yiwu—then known as “China’s trash bin”, because every imaginable product could be duplicated there for any price (with a corresponding level of quality)—he would buy small items.

Despite its higher prices, Dubai remains a place where better quality goods are offered. Trading margins are lower, but there is significantly shorter waiting time compared to an order made in China. In Yiwu, for example, once an order is placed with the factory, manufacture and transportation can take several months.



The El Eulma-Dubai-Yiwu route has become the backbone of the *made in China* supply road for Algeria. On the one hand, Dubai, Guangzhou and Yiwu are supplied “at source”, at the lowest prices. On the other hand, its clientele remains almost exclusively composed of Eulmatis, even if the Dubai souk of this city quickly radiates from the highlands into the east of Algeria, before moving throughout the country and into Tunisia. Ahmed therefore continues his search for new customers.

## **When the competition awakens**

This form of transnational trading is lucrative enough to interest copycats. All players in the commercial chain - and the many who come to join them - will eventually try their hand at importing, “even the peasant trying to sell his cow”, says Ahmed. The number of declared importers in Algeria was 34,000 in 2010. While the role of importer has become widespread and commonplace, it would nonetheless appear that when small importers (often former “shopping bag carriers”) believe themselves to be “at the source” when arriving in Dubai, those who are already in place, such as Ahmed, use Dubai

as a base for prospecting Asian suppliers, in order to stay ahead of the newcomers.

An Algerian importer from Ghardaia, based with his family in Muscat (the Sultanate of Oman), but headquartered in Dubai, took part in our interview with Ahmed, telling us that “the traders of today can’t be the shopping bag carriers of yesterday. We have university diplomas and speak three or four languages. But some of us might be the children of shopping bag carriers.” These traders maintain their lead by becoming service providers for the new, small-scale importers.

However, fierce competition is pushing the most important players to further diversify their roles, and to expand their clientele of buyers. Far from being limited to activities directly related to the transportation of goods, Ahmed's company offers a door-to-door service from China to Algeria, because the commissions (while still considerable) are not what they were fifteen years ago. For all these services, commissions amounted to 10 to 15% in 2011 for the most established traders; the young Algerian freight forwarders based in China would receive 2.5% commission per transaction. In addition, the pioneers consolidated their positions as intermediaries by working

with business partners to offer credit. So, in Dubai, customers buy from stores with pro forma invoices,<sup>38</sup> which attracts a clientele with the least means to negotiate, by bypassing these intermediaries.

The Iranian for whom Ahmed worked previously provides credit to customers, who can advance part of the money needed to purchase the ordered goods. This means that with a budget of €100,000, a buyer can purchase an additional €50,000. The East Star company, based in Yiwu, Guangzhou and Dubai, provides guarantees for this credit to buyers. Finally, in a context where Algerian legislation sought to reduce the number of importers, Ahmed gradually abandoned the Algerian market in favor of Central and Eastern Africa, where his company has already set up offices in Tanzania, Congo, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Malawi.

## **At the gates of China**

In order to maintain its role as a relay of exchange with Asia,

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<sup>38</sup> The pro forma invoice assesses the amount that will be billed to the customer. Unlike a quote, it is used to accurately determine the terms of purchase of a product and to obtain customs clearance for the purchase or sale of the goods.

the United Arab Emirates has tried to move away from its role of re-exporter, and instead bring Asian companies - Chinese and Indian - closer to their Arab and African commercial outlets.

Although the financial crisis has put Dubai's pivotal role in perspective, the city remains a useful trading post and point of departure on the sea routes which, from East Asia, now connect with Mediterranean ports directly. What was once considered "the source" is ultimately just one more step along longer routes.

This is because, relying on Dubai and the air hubs set up by the other emirates in the region (via Emirates, Qatar Airways or Kuwait Airlines), during the 1990s Arab and African traders expanded their trading networks into Asia. In less than a decade, they followed roads that took them to Southeast Asia, to markets in major metropolises where small transnational commercial worlds were forming, such as the Soi Sukhumvit district<sup>39</sup> in Bangkok or that of Tanah Abang in Jakarta.

The Asian financial crisis of 1997, and the return of Hong Kong to the Chinese fold in the same year, led many traders to the

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gates of China. The Chung-king Mansions of Hong Kong became the new trading post for small transnational traders. From there, they explored the coastal industrial areas and visited Chinese fairs, including the largest, Guangzhou, capital of the Pearl River Delta industrial region.

When, in 2001, the People's Republic of China joined the WTO, the Chinese phase of the globalization of Arab trade routes was already well underway. It grew rapidly, first with a new generation of trading posts in Guangzhou, close to the Tianxu Building, and then in Yiwu starting in 2002, giving the impression that the road had arrived at its final destination - at least temporarily.

## **The “Yiwu miracle”**

Dubai was partially responsible for creating Yiwu, a commercial hub for Muslims in the Arab world, the African continent and the Middle East. The quest for “the source,” a constant preoccupation for transnational traders, involves always being on the lookout for the best prices, on a route shifting gradually from the western Mediterranean to another gravitational center.

Beyond the emirate of Dubai—that emblematic success story of trading centralities at the crossroads of the Arab and African and Asian worlds—the central role of Saudi Arabia must be considered: the mobilities induced by religious pilgrimages, as well the teaching of Arabic to Chinese students from South-East Asia, Central Asia or the African continent in Islamic universities, have created conditions for communication and exchange which were a determining factor in the extension of the Silk Road. From the 2000s on, intense trade has developed between Yiwu and Dubai operators, creating real interfaces between the Muslim worlds and China, which small importers attempted to circumvent by going directly to the source city.

The post-9/11 period was clearly important in the development of China as a supply source for Muslim traders who frequented the North American, Mediterranean, European and Arabian Gulf trading places. However, China's exports to the Arab-Muslim world had already increased significantly in the late 1980s. Geopolitical changes were then in full swing. The Tiananmen Square events of 1989 and the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States on China led the Beijing authorities to look for new markets, in order to offer products (including weapons) from its

factories at competitive prices, but also to sign contracts in the construction industry.

The market was so promising that, as early as 1990, Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic and commercial relations with Taiwan to sign several cooperation agreements with China, and importers in Cairo, approached by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, visited the industrial area of the Pearl River Delta. The approximately 20 million Chinese Muslims then played a decisive role in the nascent relations between the People's Republic of China and states with Muslim populations.

The large consumer market in the Middle East and North Africa, on the lookout for inexpensive products, offered a major outlet for Yiwu's exports. During the 2000s, China's exports to the Arab world increased considerably, as demand for consumer goods increased due to the explosion in oil prices. In 2005, the Sino-Arab trade volume was \$51 billion, nearly ten times that of 1995; it climbed to \$133 billion in 2008 and \$200 billion in 2011, the year of the Arab Spring. The role of trading platforms such as Dubai or Djed-dah gradually diminished in favor of direct relationships between supply sources and consumer destinations. In newspapers around the world

and on many official Chinese websites, there was plenty of praise for the Yiwu miracle. Based on the “Wenzhou Model”, which became China's official economic paradigm in the 1990s, marking the shift from socialism to global capitalism, Yiwu was shaped by a series of judicious choices made by public actors and the local private sector in highly competitive contexts, both nationally and internationally.

### **A three-step strategy**

Yiwu is a two-hour train ride south of Shanghai in the coastal province of Zhejiang, which had a population of 54 million in 2014 and the 4<sup>th</sup> highest per capita GNP at \$9,400. Yiwu is now a multimillion-dollar city with a population of nearly 760,000, but hosts at least 1.33 million migrants from all parts of China. It is a prosperous city with a per capita GNP of \$19,000 in 2014. Yiwu’s success was the result of a three-step strategy.

Between 1982 and 1991, Yiwu was a market for everyday consumer goods. The creation of the Yiwu wholesale market in 1982 came in the wake of the economic opening advocated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. Starting in 1984, the development policy through



trade allowed manufacturers to make local industrial production more visible to wholesalers, first to those of Zhejiang Province, and then to all of China. From 1986 on, the central government pushed for the renovation of the distribution market, allowing producers of manufactured goods to deal directly with wholesalers.

After 1989, Chinese President Jiang Zemin paved the way for major economic reforms, including reorganizing the modalities of the distribution of goods and services. This was followed by a step-by-step decentralization that gave increasing autonomy to regional and local governments to intervene in the development and organization of markets. Yiwu thus became one of the marketplaces stemming from the reform of the Chinese distribution system, intended to facilitate the transition from a planned economy to a market economy by giving manufacturers access to new customers and to wholesalers the possibility of benefiting from prices 30% lower than those practiced outside such procedures. The success of these market-cities was such that, in Zhejiang, there were a thousand of them in 1978, 3,600 in 1988 and nearly 4,200 in 2014. Only 18 of them have sales exceeding \$15 billion a year.

Between 1992 and 2001, Yiwu became a hub for wholesale

markets in consumer goods. Since 1991, Yiwu has been the largest wholesale market in the People's Republic of China, specializing in the sale of small items. The success of this market has enshrined the choices of the local administration of industry and commerce, responsible for promoting and regulating the commercial activities which, as early as 1982, created the Zhejiang China Small Commodities City Group (CSCG), in order to create the Yiwu wholesale market. This privately-held group, very closely associated with the local councilors, was thus formed and played a determining role in three directions.

First, it broke with the collectivist “one village, one product” doctrine, which led to the formation of mono-specialized industrial districts. By attracting manufacturers scattered throughout the province, it contributed to the restructuring of the industrial fabric of Zhejiang, made up in particular of SMEs, and gave a central place to commercial cities that today play the role of lever of modernization by facilitating the flow of goods. Yiwu has become the showcase for a growing number of products, numbering around 1.8 million today.

Secondly, product exposure is an industry that has flourished in Yiwu as in other parts of China. An Algerian importer summarizes

it as follows: “Unlike fairs, the most famous of which is Guangzhou, Yiwu prices are lower, it has more products and everything is grouped in the same market.” Yiwu markets, open 364 days a year, break with the Chinese calendar of international fairs. This choice has led to an extension and diversification of markets specialized in the wholesale of “small items”, namely household appliances, stationery, toys, clothing, religious objects, exhibited in stalls of factories present in the city’s 45 licensed markets. There were 700 such markets in 1982, 16,000 ten years later, 58,000 in 2006, 62,000 in 2008 and 75,000 today. The International Trade City, known as the Futian Market, with a total of about 50,000 stalls, often less than ten square meters in size, has provided a showcase of such a magnitude that 80% of commercial transactions in the city are concentrated there.

Thirdly, the internationalization of Yiwu’s specialized market has encouraged its promoters to continually search for new buyers. The high numbers of products sold offsets the low profits. This strategy imposes the need to constantly broaden the market for the sale of products, given that the industry competes on low prices even within the same specialized market, but also between the markets themselves, at regional or national levels. SMEs have engaged in

intense price competition, often to the detriment of quality and innovation, making Yiwu one of the black spots for counterfeiting in China. It is estimated that 80-90% of products sold in its markets are counterfeit or in violation of international laws. Since the markets are managed by the CSCG, which contributes 26% of municipal revenues, the entire local economy has been closely associated with this illegal economy.

Since 2002, Yiwu has entered a new stage, that of a global trading hub. The city is now the largest wholesale market in the world for "small items", with a total transaction volume of \$130 billion in 2014.<sup>40</sup> Starting in the 1990s, the local strategy pursued by public and private operators favoring the economic changes ordered by higher decision-making authorities aims at conquering new markets in Zhejiang, then in China and finally in the rest of the world. In the mid-2000s, Yiwu was connected by some fifty markets to the national territory, particularly concentrated in the passenger and cargo ports linked to South Korea, the provinces bordering Zhejiang and China's

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<sup>40</sup> R. Li, Q. Wang, K. C. Cheong, "From Obscurity to Global Prominence - Yiwu's Emergence as an International Trade Hub", *Cities*, No. 53, 2016, pp. 8-17.

land borders.

The rise of cross-border trade has been the trigger for the internationalization of Yiwu in steps, which has accelerated over time. The main destinations are not only the neighboring states of China; the economic boom has demonstrated, as early as 2002, a trend toward the emerging markets of Eastern Europe and the Arabian Gulf.

**TABLE 2**  
**The main importers of Yiwu products (2002-2011)**

Rank	2002	2006	2009	2010	2011
1	UAE	United States	United States	United States	EU
2	Russia	UAE	UAE	UAE	ASEAN
3	United States	Russia	Germany	Germany	Iran
4	South Korea	Ukraine	Spain	Brazil	India
5	Ukraine	South Korea	Russia	Russia	Egypt
6	Japan	Germany	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	UAE
7	Saudi Arabia	Spain	Italy	Italy	Saudi Arabia
8		United Kingdom	Brazil	Iran	Brazil
9		Panama	Iran	India	Iraq
10		Brazil	India	Spain	Algeria

Sources: Yiwu customs (<http://old.echinacities.com>, 2006; <http://www.yiwumarketguide.com/>, 2009 ; “The Internationalization Process of Chinese SMEs, Does Globalizing Wholesale Markets Play a Role? 2010; <http://www.yiwu-sourcing-agent.com>, 2011). Note: UAE: United Arab Emirates ; ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations; EU: European Union.

Thanks to political decisions taken at various levels and

large-scale economic and geopolitical changes, Yiwu is positioned at the heart of transnational trading networks that connect different regions of the Muslim world. Yiwu has developed an attractive offer for the largest number of traders, in a context where the saturation of the markets requires the deployment of new strategies. The buyer summarizes: "After ten years of massive imports, Algerians had bought a lot. We made some big orders. And in Yiwu, we could put together containers with several products."

In all, in 2010, 70% of the 11,000 foreign residents in Yiwu were Arab, and 200,000 Arab buyers came to Yiwu, half of all foreign buyers visiting the city every year. Moreover, Yiwu is not only frequented by Arabs, but also increasingly by Muslims from across the whole world.

## **Exotic Street: an Arab neighborhood in a Chinese city**

Such a presence has a visible impact on the city. This can be seen by specific hospitality conditions, organized by both municipal authorities and private operators.

At the end of the 1990s, near the first exhibition center in Binwang, in the heart of the Arab restaurant district, there were a few streets specializing in trade with the Arab-Muslim world, notably by offering religious and textile articles. Though this district is known by different names, San Mao Chu (Economic District No. 3) is the administrative designation. The Chinese call it more often *Alabo fan dian* (“Arabic restaurant” in Chinese) or, just like the Arabs, *Al Maedah* (the “table” in Arabic), in reference to the first Egyptian restaurant built in the neighborhood.

Given the scale of the phenomenon, the municipality of Yiwu renamed the area with signs in English, giving it the name “Exotic Street”, to demonstrate the “cosmopolitanism” character of the area, dedicated to leisure activities and nightlife, for both visiting traders and for Chinese or foreign residents of Yiwu, thereby erasing any specific identity that could be attached to the place.

The small district around Exotic Street is several city blocks in size, and is crossed by five parallel streets lined with shops with signs written in Chinese, Arabic, English and, increasingly, Turkish or Perso-Arabic. A square lined with restaurants and hotels acts as the neighborhood’s center. The blocks are interconnected by streets and

alleys to form small squares. They are dotted with stores selling clothing, textiles or religious articles, as well as with freight forwarders, hotels, restaurants and hair salons.

It is a real landmark in the city's center, where Muslim traders meet at the end of the day, when the International Trade City closes its doors and the night market opens. The neighborhood comes alive at that hour, and the restaurants and their terraces are filled with people, often until very late at night, often helped by the jet lag of their customers. Strolling through the product exhibition halls gives way to bargaining around a table or chatting between traders from around the world and their Yiwu-based middlemen. Within this cosmopolitan group, one recognizes, by their dress and the languages they speak:<sup>41</sup> Uighurs, Huis, Pakistanis, Arabs, Turks and Africans. People smoke water pipes and tea or coffee is drunk on the terraces of restaurants and kebab stores; street vendors and money changers occupy the sidewalks.

The San Mao Chu neighborhood responds first to the culinary needs of Muslim traders looking for *balai* food, especially in

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<sup>41</sup> The Huis, with a population of nearly 10 million, make up half of Chinese Muslims.



a country where language problems can be acute. It also helps business visitors staying in Yiwu for a couple of days and who are in need of fixed landmarks. The largest nationalities visiting Yiwu have their own hotel-restaurants, which serve as a contact point for the many traders passing through. It is in these restaurants, but also in hair salons or barbers, that traders or residents meet, discuss business or simply exchange news.



Service businesses for merchants in the  
Exotic Street neighborhood (Yiwu, China  
©O. Pliez, 2015).

The store managers are either foreigners or Chinese, but the staff is mostly Chinese and Muslim. All are Muslim and Arabic is the *lingua franca*. The neighborhood is condensed version of the Yiwu's business activities, a microcosm where traders and new migrants cross paths.

## **Yiwu traders**

Yiwu, August 2012. Summer evenings in the city are hot and humid. During Ramadan, as night falls and the city's exhibition halls begin to close, passers-by, mostly men, begin to move to the terraces of one of the many cafes and restaurants of the "Arab Quarter" to break their fasts or to relax. There are tens of thousands of them, coming from all over the world every year with the knowledge that the prices here are low and there is a plethora of stationery products, decoration items, souvenirs, jewelry, etc.

Arcan is one of these traders, an intermediary who welcomes buyers who have come to Yiwu for a few days. He helps them find the products they're looking for in the meanders of exhibition halls, then supports them in the reception of the goods ordered, following them through their packaging, their loading on containers, customs clearance, and then shipping to the port indicated by the buyer.

There are thousands of people doing the same job in Yiwu. Most operate in a family setting and act as the local relays between families of traders. Some have freed themselves from this limiting bond and have entered the world trading scene. Sometimes success is born of failure. Such is the case of Arcan and his brother, both Turks. After attending high school in Antakya, they emigrated to Saudi Arabia, worked in the oil industry for seven years, saved a small nest egg, and then decided to start their own business, a restaurant, with a loan from their boss.

The restaurant didn't work out well. The two brothers went into debt. They heard about China, Yiwu, and the opportunities for quick profits in an expanding marketplace. Arcan's older brother visited the city first, in order to buy products, before settling there permanently to become a trader, that is to say an intermediary between

wholesalers and sellers. Arcan followed suit and opened a hairdressing salon, a classic screen for the activities of intermediaries, allowing him to develop his still somewhat modest list of contacts. He got married, like his brother. Their Turkish wives and their children, still young, settle in Yiwu. They stayed there until the children were old enough to go to school.

Arcan's friends are also traders, like Nasser from Lebanon, who joined him at the terrace of a café. He grew up in Central Africa, and was part of the Lebanese diaspora spreading over the continent. As such, he came to buy products to supply family shops in Nigeria, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Yiwu, he met other Lebanese citizens from Latin America, and was able to expand his address book, leaving first to work in Ciudad del Este, in the region of the three borders (Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil), then in Sao Paulo.

This diversification was made necessary by the difficult situation experienced by traders of Arab origin. They rely on supply networks based on mutual trust, which were disrupted by the Arab Spring. Nasser, however, remained optimistic, because, according to him, the economic crisis that the Western countries are going through will lead them to buy more and more cheap products, like those sold

in Yiwu.

Nabil is a South African buyer and his niche is booming. Of Indo-Muslim origin, he sells household security items. He was working as a buyer in the United States, when he heard about the prominent place of Muslims in Yiwu. By changing his supply sources, he “earned in two years what he previously earned in ten.”

Arcan, Nasser and Nabil, who met regularly on the terrace of cafes and restaurants of Yiwu, represented the new faces of the globalization of trade: migrants who go on to become traders. Muslims from all continents, they are a reflection of the changes that Yiwu has driven. The drop in consumption in Arab countries shaken by political and economic crises coincided with its rise in a new supply area, from Turkey to Afghanistan. Yiwu is now held up by Chinese authorities as a model on a worldwide scale.

## **New silk roads?**

For about ten years, a hypothesis has been put forward and widely discussed among the actors of the global planet: that of a rebirth of the silk roads. Many economists have celebrated this

renaissance. Some, like Ben Simpfendorfer,<sup>42</sup> have highlighted the changing post-9/11 geopolitical context to understand how an expanding Arab world was turning away from the West to rediscover China.

This hypothesis is evocative and seductive. The expression is convenient, but it is nonetheless erroneous, if the parallel between the ancient and medieval roads is maintained too closely.<sup>43</sup> We know the temporary center: China. We also know the terms of the exchange, maritime more than terrestrial. We are less familiar with the ramifications, the places and the actors, who point us to a global scale and who cover almost all the areas of the planet. While these may have appeared for a moment to come from the South (which is contradicted by Yiwu's trading partner data), it seems that the question should be viewed from a different scale.

The Chinese President Xi Jinping inaugurated the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum in June

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<sup>42</sup> B. Simpfendorfer, *The New Silk Road. How a Rising Arab World is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> J. A. Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

2014, highlighting a Sino-Jordanian couple running a restaurant in Yiwu, claiming that “the rapid development of relations between China and the Arab countries have drawn their peoples closer together.” The global market city, known for its transnational trading communities and its orientation towards the consumer markets of the various “Souths”, has now become an iconic milestone in China's new geostrategy. Against a backdrop of economic crisis and the restructuring of the industrial apparatus, the race at the bottom of the pyramid initiated by China during the 2000s seems to be over.

The “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) mega project, now known as “BRI”, for “Belt and Road Initiative, launched in the fall of 2013 by Xi Jinping, is targeting the relaunch of transcontinental relations on a unprecedented scale. The route is maritime and reaches Europe via the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal; the belt is terrestrial and connects China to Europe, via Central Asia and Russia.

The idea is not new. The OBOR project could be considered as the new version of the centuries-old fantasies of the Silk Roads. It is, for the most part, a repackaging of national and international initiatives that have been in the making for two decades, and that are now linked to each other by the concerned states and supra-state

actors, such as the European Union or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as by multinationals looking for a logistical option between air transport (faster, but more expensive) and shipping (cheaper, but requiring seven weeks of transit).

However, as the outlines of this ambitious project become clearer (in terms of scale, funding, partners and geopolitical implications), we can only be surprised by the rapidity of its deployment across the world, encompassing 65 countries and concerning 4.4 billion people.

Since 2011, this has resulted in the establishment of several maritime freight or freight rail links that open - or highlight - new multimodal corridors between Chinese cities and a growing number of European cities in Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, France or Spain. The abundance of comments generated about a project of this magnitude is very telling. The issues raised are obviously multiple, both geo-economic and geopolitical, of course, as much as technical.



**TABLE 3****Railway lines between China and the European Union**

Line name	Route	Distance	Duration	Launch	Frequency
Yuxinou	Chongqing-Duisburg	11,200 km	(days)	7/2011	3 times a week
Hanxinou	Wuhan-Mělm'k (CZ) /	10,900 km	16	10/2012	2 to 3 times a
Sumanou	Pardubice (CZ) /	11,200 km	16	11/2012	week
Rongou	Turkmenistan	9,800 km	18	4/2013	6 to 8 times a
Zhengou	Suzhou-Warsaw	10,200 km	10.5,	7/2013	week
Yixinou	Chengdu Łódź	13,000 km	19-20.	11/2014	Once a week
Hexinou	Zhengzhou Hamburg	11,000 km	21	6/2014	Once a week
Xiangou	Yiwu-Madrid	11,800 km	15	10/2014	3 times so far
Hau	Hefei-Germany	9,800 km	18	6/2015	2 times a
	Changsha-Duisburg /	11,300 km	15	4/2016	month
	Moscow / Tashkent	12,000 km	15	1/2017	Every 10 days
	Harbin-Hamburg		18		Once a week
	Wuhan-Venissieux Saint-Priest				
	Yiwu-London				

In the new emerging paradigm, it is no longer the world that goes to trading posts in China, but China that goes to the world. This movement is accompanied by a Chinese vision of development and also economic concerns that seek new markets for products manufactured by China and new purchase sources for a growing

domestic consumer market.

In this new phase, states and international institutions are developing economic strategies that follow up on the economic and cultural capital built by two generations of migrant entrepreneurs. However, as the anthropologist Magnus Marsden has pointed out, one might question the virtual absence of links between the institutional strategies and those of the actors already inscribed in the transnational networks. “Why sell the dream of a ‘new silk road’ when a multiplicity of silk roads (or perhaps nylon) already exist?”<sup>44</sup>

The question is relevant, because there is always a risk that the top-down initiatives hinder, more than they help, what already exists and is functioning, often discreetly, at the margins of the activities of governments and global industrial groups.

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<sup>44</sup> M. Marsden, “Actually Existing Silk Roads”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, No. 8, 2017, pp. 22-30.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **African Globalizations**

In August 2016, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook and seventh richest man in the world, traveled to Lagos, Nigeria for his first visit to the African continent. Like a few before him, he decided to go see *in situ* what this huge market of poor Africans represents. With only 10% of the population having access to the Internet and more than one billion inhabitants, Africa represents a huge potential for the social networking giant.

While sub-Saharan Africa is known for having some of the highest poverty rates in the world, people such as Mark Zuckerberg or Vincent Bolloré prefer to look at the continent from the perspective of its different growth rates, often in double digits, in countries such as Nigeria or Ivory Coast.

### **Trading posts and urban corridors**

The African continent, whose population is expected to

double by 2050 (it would then represent a quarter of humanity, according to INED's figures in 2017), is asserting itself as the last frontier of the global capitalism.<sup>45</sup> Whether one is Afro-pessimistic or Afro-optimistic, it is clear that the image of an isolated Africa, dominated by global flows that bypass it, no longer holds true (and may never have been true).

Several research projects have recently highlighted Africa's intense ties with the rest of the world, such as the development of trade with China, according to a *win-win* policy that would generate diplomatic and economic benefits for both the Chinese and Africans. These evolutions invite us to look at Africa differently, to grasp in real time the changing geography of trading posts and transnational roads that connect the continent to the rest of the world.

These trading posts do not necessarily have to do with those born during the colonization period. Even if the names of certain companies go back to the colonial period, such as the CFAO (*Compagnie française d'Afrique de l'Ouest*, or the French West Africa Company), the continuity is not always obvious. New poles emerge,

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<sup>45</sup> K. C. Moghalu, *Emerging Africa: How the Global Economy's "Last Frontier" Can Prosper and Matter*, London, England Penguin Book, 2014.

while others decline. Today's big traders sometimes made their fortunes in just ten years. Port infrastructures, major roads and warehouses give testimony to the intensity of exchanges and connections, which take on new forms. These trade posts are closely connected to the world and are interconnected among each other to form corridors of urbanization, circulation and consumption that are fed and driven by small traders, travelers, businessmen and migrants.

We propose to meet these poor Africans who live, lodge, move and consume in these connected spaces. We've chosen to focus on one space in particular: the urban corridor from Abidjan to Lagos, which corresponds to the largest urban concentration in Africa. Between Accra and Lagos, for nearly 500 kilometers, no fewer than 30 million inhabitants are concentrated. Here on this thin strip of land wedged between sea and lagoon, circulate men and objects, symbols of a modern and globalized Africa.

To understand this Africa in motion, our idea has been to follow cement bags, second-hand clothes, used cars, grass skirts and locks of hair, starting from their place of consumption and moving back to their place of production. This is how we will be able to understand how globalization is settling into discrete spaces, closer to

the poor.



Telephone credit sellers in Cotonou (Benin). © Martin Lozivit, 2017.

## Buses, planes and men

A trip down West African highways helps one understand the intensity of the exchanges that are woven there. These exchanges, which may or may not have links with China, are carried out by the discrete actors of globalization.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> This passage is taken from an article co-written in 2014 by J.

To understand these movements, far from the cameras focused on migrants from the South trying to reach Europe, we have decided to take public transport with these ordinary men and women, between different countries (Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria). While riding alongside them, we have been able to observe individuals doing business, trying to take advantage of price differences across borders, supplying local markets and, most importantly, desiring to consume.

Our multi-site and dynamic analyses have revealed how globalized the exchanges really are, at the same moment that the organizers of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), intended to streamline the mobility of people and goods in this area, on the model of the Schengen area in Europe, are experiencing so many difficulties even in being established. Despite the official texts that promise free movement, travelers remain at the mercy of the coercive policies pursued by each state and harassment at the numerous customs authorities.

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Lombard and entitled “On West African Roads, Everyday Mobility and Exchanges Between Senegal, Mali and Mauritania” *Canadian Journal of African studies*, vol. 48-1, pp. 59-75.

In West Africa, the number of passengers and goods in circulation has risen sharply in recent years, as has the number of transport operators, characteristic of the total privatization of public transport, to the benefit of well-advised transportation operators. The largest companies possess impressive fleets and are able to offer different destinations at the same time, using coaches in fairly good condition and well-trained staff who are experienced and accustomed to long journeys and possible difficulties. This is the case of SONEF (Société Néma et Frères), which belongs to an entrepreneur whose family (Tuareg and Moorish) has roots in Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Its transnational know-how enables it to operate every day on the Bamako-Niamey line via Ouagadougou, or on the highway linking Bamako to Nouakchott.

Road transport by coach offers an increasingly efficient international service option, accessible to less well-off travelers (compared to the plane), relatively reliable (schedules are respected) and safe (there are fewer reported accidents than with taxis). This popular and transnational mode of transport is responding to growing demand, particularly from traders and migrant travelers.

Air transport, which is now more accessible, has widened



horizons and facilitated the movement of people and goods, complements this offer. After the end of Air Afrique in 2001, the more or less privatized national companies and new local or foreign companies have developed their offer in response to the demand of migrants, traders and pilgrims. Maghreb-based companies have in turn recognized the interest of capturing this West African clientele.

Royal Air Maroc (RAM) provides a good example: the company centralizes its activity at the Casablanca airport, a hub from which a dozen flights to the capitals of West and Central Africa leave every night, powered by aircraft from the Near and Middle East (Djeddah, Dubai, Cairo) or Europe (Paris, Rome). Emirates and Turkish Airlines, with its slogan “*Globally yours*”, offer weekly connections between Dakar, Istanbul, Dubai, and open routes to Asia.

## **The regulars of the Dakar-Bamako axis**

By hitting the road ourselves, we were able to interact with passengers, drivers and ticket sellers, and learn their different routes over hundreds of kilometers. In each vehicle, we undertook “x-rays”, systematically asking our passengers neighbors their origin, their

destination and the reasons for their trip.

Most of the fifty people we interviewed on the Dakar-Bamako route consider the Malian capital just a point of transit along a much longer route. Their final destinations were cities such as Luanda, Kinshasa, Libreville, N'Djamena, Niamey, Cotonou, Abidjan, Tripoli or Algiers. Many travelers were young and seemed to have mastered the route that led them to their destination. Women made up an important part of the passengers. While some were following their husbands, others were travelling together, sometimes with their children. They were using the opportunity to combine family visits and commercial activities. In one Dakar-Bamako bus, three Congolese women were on their way to Kinshasa:

We came to attend a baptism and marriage in Senegal three weeks ago. By plane. In Dakar, with an association made up of Congolese women, we got together to buy goods and ship them by container to Congo [...]. Now we're going back by the road. It's cheaper that way. We will buy grass dresses in Bamako, then in Cotonou. From the port there, we will ship the fabric by container and fly to Congo.

A young Malian told us he was buying car parts in Nouakchott and Dakar, in order to sell them in Mali. Another

Mauritanian woman living in the north of the country, Nouadhibou, was a regular on the line: in Bamako, she sold Chinese goods (shoes, trinkets) bought duty-free at the Nouadhibou port, and buys fabrics (indigo) that she would resell upon her return to Nouakchott.

For many travelers, trade is the prime motivation for long-distance travel. They want to demonstrate their flexibility; they can change routes, put up with the harsh realities of customs authorities, long waits, negotiations, and traffic of all kinds. West African mobility must not be seen as a mere heritage or the reactivation of ancestral traditions of circulation and movement.

The observed economic system is renewed every day, playing on complementarities and interlinking migratory networks and traders; family strategies are combined with spur-of-the-moment commercial opportunities. The corridors of circulation and consumption that are emerging make it possible to link market places, actors and products.

## **Cement, or African “gray gold”**

Along the Accra-Lomé-Cotonou-Porto-Novo-Lagos road,

for nearly 500 kilometers, nearly 30 million inhabitants live, circulate, consume and build. This urban corridor is destined to become the largest urban concentration in Africa by 2070.<sup>47</sup> Along this corridor the same warehouses and hardware stores appear and reappear, selling cement, gravel, reinforced steel, sheet metal and tiles. In certain interstitial areas, it's hard to tell the difference between city and country. Cement has become the marker of this city-less form of urbanization.

The price of cement is written in chalk every day in front of the hardware stores. Just like stock market prices in rich countries, the fluctuating price of cement testifies to the health of the economy of the poor countries. Despite its apparent banality, a bag of cement says a lot about the functioning of the contemporary world, the aspirations to modernity of these neo-urban masses as the globalized connections that its circulation implies.

A colleague of ours, an eminent professor of the University

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<sup>47</sup> Accra (5 million inhabitants), Lome (1 million), Cotonou (1.5 million), Porto-Novo (500,000) and Lagos (18 million). See F. Moriconi-Ebrard, D. Harre and P. Heinrigs, *L'Urbanisation des pays de l'Afrique de l'Ouest 1950-2010. Africapolis I, mise à jour 2015*, Paris, Éditions OCDE, "Cahiers de l'Afrique de l'Ouest", 2016.

of Abomey-Calavi in Benin, was even given “one ton of cement” by his colleagues on his retirement. This was a great mark of respect: the gray gold offered him the first step towards the construction of his “home” and demonstrated respect and esteem. After it was built, he would be able to admire his cement house, a symbol of modernity and success in Africa. In February 2017, at the large lottery known as “La Beninoise” (named after the local beer), the second prize was “tons of cement”.

These two anecdotes reflect the importance of cement in Africa, a common building material for the rich as well as for the poor. “In Benin, we sell more cement than bread,” said a cement dealer in March 2017. The “gray concrete” color now characterizes these urban landscapes in permanent construction: in the city centers, cranes are busy erecting towers, while on the fringes, the rural spaces of yesterday, concrete mixers turn and the cement never stops flowing.

“When construction is fine, everything is fine!” The old adage is more relevant than ever in Africa, where both leaders and property owners see the dynamism of cities. Economic growth is generally measured by a strong demand for cement. Residents build using solid building materials: a clear sign that they have escaped

poverty and entered into the economic system.

The World Bank, which once saw the city as a parasite on rural resources, now views it as a place of development and prosperity. UN Habitat explicitly designates megaregions and urban corridors as the engines of development that should bring the rest of the country up through their dynamism under the influence of the famous trickle-down theory for the redistribution of wealth. These principles were reaffirmed in the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 and the holding of the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, Habitat III, in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016. Cement is considered to accompany the advent of the sustainable, resilient and inclusive city.

## **LafargeHolcim and Dangote on the conquest of Africa**

The goal of “housing for all” and the now-accepted principle of self-construction using solid building materials would explain the consensus around the production of cement, presented as a product of “first necessity”. While local governments generally set floor prices

or even exempt the material from VAT, the major cement groups present themselves as companies involved in the development of national economies. They justify the need to expand their production to lower the price of the cement bag and make it accessible to as many people as possible.

The big groups have understood the immense financial market represented by these lower-income classes in search of solid material housing. They position themselves by launching programs for the “bottom of the pyramid”. LafargeHolcim and Cemex are financing access to affordable housing programs, with subsidized materials and microloans (such as the Cemex "Hoy" program and the LafargeHolcim "14Trees" program). DuraBric, marketed in Malawi by LafargeHolcim for affordable and environmentally-friendly housing, is clearly targeting the peri-urban and rural poor population.

The consensus on the benefits of cement and the opportunities offered by these companies (creating jobs, producing housing, lifting the masses out of poverty) means that very few voices are raised against the opening of cement plants in the South. However, the environmental issues are major: cement is a hard material, certainly durable over time, but without being "sustainable" from an

ecological point of view. It is clear that cement manufacturers are among the largest emitters of greenhouse gases (7% of global emissions). This is the ambiguity of cement, considered a driver of development on one hand, while its production has an eminently negative impact on climate change.

Whereas the construction sector is running out of steam in the cities in the West, it still represents a huge emerging market for large groups in Africa, China, India and the Gulf countries. African cities in particular, with their middle and upper classes eager to consume, are presented as the last frontiers of capitalism (the city of Lagos has 12,000 millionaires in dollars). Margins are important, not only for the construction of closed neighborhoods and shopping malls, but also for the affordable housing and dense informal peripheries that shelter the poorest.

Population growth, economic emergence, and investments in African cities translate into strong demand for cement. Large groups are playing on prices to gain access to this urban market of millions of people in search of housing. LafargeHolcim, Heidelberg, and also Dangote (Nigerian cement giant) and other smaller companies like Wacem (West African Cernent, using Indian capital), CIMAF



(Ciments d'Afrique, Moroccan capital) or Cimenterie du Sahel compete without mercy.

The struggle to penetrate this promising market is still raging. Until the 1980s, cement was largely imported from Europe. But because it is a heavy material that is difficult to transport, large groups have, in the late 2000s, strongly invested in Africa where they opened cement plants. Some are integrated cement plants, which extract limestone from the thin West African deposits and convert it into cement (which is expensive because of the price of energy). Others are simple grinding facilities, located near ports where they receive imported clinker (a component of cement, composed of 80% limestone and high temperature baked clay).

The opening of these cement plants has had the effect of lowering the price of cement in the sub-region. In Benin, for example, the price of one ton went from 110,000 CFA francs in 2014 to 110,000 in November 2017 (i.e. €100). For comparison, one ton costs 85,000 CFA francs in Côte d'Ivoire, 80,000 CFA francs in Togo and Niger, 60,000 CFA francs in Nigeria. Depending on demand, production and fluctuations in the different local currencies, gray gold circulates over West African roads.

## **The trials and tribulations of the cement bag**

We propose following these cement bags down West African roads. This strategy brings together two approaches, that of the *material turn*, which focuses on everyday objects, and that of the *follow the thing* approach, which makes it possible to trace product through a given sector (production, circulation and consumption of a product). By following one of these bags, from the quarries from which the material is extracted to the plots of the urban peripheries where the majority of the poor live, we can understand the material life of these populations and grasp how the city (or at least the urban) is taking shape in Africa.

September 2016. At the Togo-Benin border, no fewer than 300 Dangote trucks loaded with cement are waiting. The owner of the trucks, Aliko Dangote, is well known in the region: he is the richest businessman in Nigeria, but also in Africa (25<sup>th</sup> richest man in the world). The story goes that the giant of the Dangote Cernent empire is supposed to have started by selling three trucks of cement in 1977, before making his fortune and becoming the principal producer of

cement in West Africa.

What are the trucks of the Nigerian giant doing between Togo and Benin? Where do they come from, loaded in this way, when they are registered in Ghana? A few days later, we find these same trucks 60 kilometers down the road, on the Ghana-Togo border this time. Trucks are still loaded. We finally cross them three days later, empty, in Tema, the industrial and port area located on the outskirts of Accra.

Aliko Dangote acquired a logistics platform on which it takes in the trucks. From Tema, the cement is redistributed to resellers located in Ghana, but also in Burkina Faso and Mali, where the cement is much more expensive.

Dangote's strategy, as philanthropic as it may appear (lowering cement prices), is actually due to cyclical factors: the economic crisis that Nigeria has been suffering from since July 2016. The local currency, the naira, has been devalued. Nigerian cement is now competitive. Very quickly, lucrative cement smuggling channels were set up on both sides of the (very porous) Benin-Nigeria border. For Dangote, the Nigerian economic crisis represents the opportunity to redeploy itself in the sub-region.

Dangote thus took advantage of the 1,000 trucks it had just acquired, in July 2016, from the Chinese company Sino-truk (which had offered it ten and with which it has just created a joint venture to bring the trucks directly in Nigeria), to transport cement produced in Nigeria to Ghana. The factory is not far from Porto-Novo, the capital of Benin, which, in the evening, sees these trucks rolling one behind the other in the city center. Dangote, already present on the Beninese soil, has no interest in playing the competition: the main Beninese quarry of Onigbolo is operated by the Company of cements of Benin (SCB) Lafarge, which is owned 51% by LafargeHolcim, 43% by Dangote and 6% by the Beninese State.

In addition, the successive Beninese presidents (Thomas Boni Yayi and Patrice Talon) have refused to allow Dangote to sell its cement on Beninese soil. The same is true in Togo, where relations between Dangote and the government are strained. In November 2016, Dangote was accused of price dumping: it was selling one ton at 65,000 CFA francs, while the Togolese government had set the price to 82,500 francs. This led to a heated debate in the National Assembly, where some MPs accused the Togolese government of refusing to allow Dangote to set up shop, and defended the company,

on the grounds that it would help lower prices. Dangote preferred avoiding a controversy and simply transported its cement through Benin and Togo. It found it better to compete with the Heidelberg Germans in Ghana (GhaCem), a country experiencing high economic growth, and re-export the cement from its platform in Tema to neighboring countries (Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, etc.).

Dangote's strategy is based primarily on spatial considerations: its trucks were crisscrossing the roads of Africa, before the Nigerian giant settled down permanently by buying production sites and then redistribution points, even in the most remote urban fringes, where the ratio of the kilo of cement to the population has demonstrated the highest growth. Now that Dangote is the owner of the trucks that transport its cement, the company controls the entire industry. It is therefore completely independent from transporters and their potential nuisance (lobbies and strikes). There are almost no financial repercussions in the countries crossed.

Dangote isn't the only company on these same West African roads, however. The "buffalo" trucks are always at its heels. They are called this way because of the buffaloes depicted on their doors, the trademark of the German cement manufacturer Heidelberg. These

trucks (about 200 in number) belong to the rich Nigerian businessman Illiassou Moumouni, who has an agreement with the giant Heidelberg to supply clinker to his various cement plants (Heidelberg does not extract limestone, its cement works use imported clinker). Clinker comes from China and Indonesia, where Heidelberg produces cheaper clinker than Africa (\$30 versus \$80 in Africa, because of high energy prices). It supplies CimBénin cement plants in Cotonou and CimTogo in Lomé, both owned by Heidelberg and located near the ports. Buffalo trucks carry the clinker to Niger and Burkina Faso, where a new cement plant has just opened in the northern outskirts of Ouagadougou.

## **The cinder block, the poor man's gold bar**

In countries in the global south, where most people earn their livings through informal commerce, and who therefore have irregular incomes, urban materiality is indicative of the hardships faced by the urban poor. Because the vast majority of city dwellers don't have access to credit and have only a moderate confidence in the embryonic banking system, they tend to buy materials that they then store directly

on their plots of land.

It is a way of hoarding one's money. A billboard is often set down in the middle of the plot, indicating the name of the owner and, piled up around its base, the signs of a construction site to come (bags of cement or bricks). Once the plot has acquired, a long construction phase begins, which can last many years, depending on the regularity (or not) of the owner's income. In addition to the piles of sand and the cement bricks, there are concrete reinforcing bars, iron roof sheeting, as well as the trellises and windows... A trustworthy mason still has to be found to visit the site regularly, and ensure that work is progressing. According to Benjamin:

Everyone is looking for his "home sweet home". As soon as you start working, you want your own home, so you tighten your belt. You save little by little, to buy the plot of land first, and then to build your house. And in the end, when you finally finish everything, you're ready to retire, and that's when you die, at the moment you take possession of your property.

In this way, traditional wood and stilt housing is being replaced by cement houses along the Gulf of Guinea. Nevertheless, everyone agrees that cement, which keeps in the heat, isn't suitable

for humid tropical climates.

As François explains, who has been building a small house in the distant outskirts of Cotonou for the last ten years:

The mud houses are naturally ventilated, it's always the same temperature inside. Of course, it's better than cement. But we prefer cement. It lasts longer. You don't have to rebuild your house after every rain. It's permanent.

Cement has a special meaning. It is no longer simply a matter of owning some land, but of asserting your respectability, through the hardness of the cement and the brick. The durability of these materials means being long-term, and we can stop using precarious materials. "Building one's home is one of the dreams of most Beninese citizens," explains Moses, a city planner. First, it's a tool for measuring social success and the place an individual deserves in his family."

Acquiring cement bags and building concrete puts an end to the precariousness of construction, and, by extension, to the precariousness of the city. No longer being thought of as poor due to the use of materials such as bamboo and sheet metal, no longer being at the mercy of eviction policies, building with solid materials, laying the foundations, climbing up the social ladder: symbols that legitimize one's existence, one's right to live there. In this sense,



cement gives proof of one's right to be in the city and to remain there  
- a first stone towards a right to the city.

## **“City-less” urbanization**

A “cement culture” is thus being created in Africa, with the support of the major groups and the public authorities that jointly control supply and demand. Following an alchemy proper to the capitalist and neoliberal era, cement transforms land into real estate, and, by the simple act of pouring and hardening, multiplies the value of a piece of property. Cement is a source of impoverishment for the poorest, who try to stack up blocks at the cost of long and costly efforts, and immediate enrichment for the richest, who dump tons of cement to fill the slightest spaces left undeveloped in African cities.

Miles of buildings, hundreds of unfinished sites, but also deposits of cement (approved or not), gravel, and hardware: here are the markers of this *city-less urbanization*. All the characteristics of urban life are present here (buildings, infrastructures, transport, networks), and yet we can't really speak of a real city. Urbanity, centrality, shared and culturally symbolic spaces, identity and the

memory of places are sorely lacking.

Next to the cement depots and hardware stores, other elements come to mark this form of urbanization. For example, evangelical churches, highly globalized, settle down in areas near to the poor, who constitute their “business capital”. Evangelization works hand in hand with urbanization and globalization. Spider webs (the name of illegal connections on the power grid) are other witnesses of the limits of urbanization. Here, the inhabitants pull the wires, as if to bring the networks - meaning the city and modernity - to their homes: in these discrete peripheral spaces, they dream of also being able to watch television and recharge their smartphones.

Along the roads and at the borders of the urban areas, there are container shops for the main mobile telephone operators, which have turned into bank counters. Thanks to the telephone operators, who have changed in recent years into mobile banks, it is possible to transfer, send and receive money and make payments via their mobile phones, far from city centers. These companies are also coming out to meet the poor. Urbanization becomes “planetary”, as predicted by Henri Lefebvre in the 1970s, and after him Neil Brenner and Christian

Schmid.<sup>48</sup> It is certainly one of the most visible spatial transformations that accompany globalization.

## **Lebanese, Indian and Chinese diasporas**

Across the routes of Africa circulate cement and, with it, many other building materials and consumer goods. Concrete iron, tiling, sheet metal, paint, and also soft drinks, biscuits, tomato paste, used cars: so many moving objects that connect parts of African cities with Lebanon, India or the United States and China, revealing highly globalized relations. The role of the Lebanese, Indian and Chinese diasporas in Africa, as well as West Africans now settled in China, is to send, accompany or receive these goods.

Miziara is a small Lebanese town with little more than 5,000 inhabitants. It is nevertheless known for its 300 "bling-bling" villas with interesting shapes (a Boeing 747, a Greek temple, a pyramid, a

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<sup>48</sup> H. Lefebvre, *La Révolution urbaine*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970; N. Brenner and C. Schmid, "Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban? ", *City*, No. 19, 2-3, 2015, pp. 151-182.

palace with thirty rooms).<sup>49</sup> It is said that the money comes from Nigeria. Gilbert Chagoury, the richest Lebanese man in Nigeria, is from Miziara. He promised to build in the middle of Lagos a gigantic and luxurious modern city next to the sea, like a new African Dubai: Eko Atlantic.

In West Africa, the Chagoury group is also known for its subsidiaries in telecoms, hotels and construction that are spread throughout the region. Other members of the family head La Roche stores (construction equipment distribution) in Accra, Lome, Cotonou and Lagos. In Cotonou, the group also became a real estate developer, creating a private district and the Golden Tulip hotel on the seafront.

The Lebanese occupy an undeniably important place in the West African construction sector. They are found at all levels of the sector: at the head of factories for the manufacturing materials, large construction groups, large supply stores or property development. Examples of success stories like the Chagoury family are numerous, such as the Fakhry family in Ghana, specializing in the pipe and

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<sup>49</sup> See: [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/04/07/au-liban-un-village-bling-bling-construit-avec-l-argent-du-nigeria\\_5107613\\_3\\_212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/04/07/au-liban-un-village-bling-bling-construit-avec-l-argent-du-nigeria_5107613_3_212.html)

plastics factories (Interplast), or the HAGE steel producer group, founded by Joseph Hage, a Burkinabé citizen of Lebanese origin. Starting as an importer of materials in Africa in the 1970s, the latter took advantage of the public incentives in the 1990s to become an entrepreneur, by opening steel production plants in Burkina Faso, Togo and Benin (sheet metal, false ceilings, doors, concrete bars).

The Lebanese diaspora straddles several West African countries, and can fall back on any one of them in case of crisis or conflict. It sets up production facilities, supplies markets and imports wholesale. The same goes for the Indians, who develop their activities between Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Ghana. A rich Indian importer, who was born in Ghana but who has been living in Benin for over thirty years, explains:

I don't work in construction materials, nor in used cars. The Lebanese don't like me that much already, so I don't want to step on their flowerbeds. I have a brewery to produce beer, a plastic factory and lots of land. I plan to open a supermarket to sell all the cheap products that I import.

The list of products he imports is endless: Maxam toothpaste from China, Biskrem biscuits from Turkey, Gino tomato concentrate (Indian brand, but made with concentrate of Chinese tomatoes), Baron

Romero wine from Spain, Don Simon sangria, etc. He explains that he made his fortune first in Nigeria:

I was living in Maiduguri, on the border with Chad. Because of Boko Haram, I preferred to settle my family in Benin. It's safer. And there aren't so many Chinese in Benin. They're not that interested in the country, because there are few natural resources like uranium or oil. So, I took this import slot.

While the Chinese are still few, their weight has increased in recent years in the African markets for consumer goods, textiles and building materials. The "China town" in Lagos, a kind of fortified and museum-like village composed of about twenty shops, may be almost empty, but the Chinese are nonetheless present and lead many sectors. The same is true for household equipment, including sanitary ware and ceramics, which come from a district around Foshan City on the Pearl River near Guangzhou: "The Chinese worked us over us a little. They lowered the prices of the tiles. If you want to buy a lot and for cheap, you have to go to Alaba International Market," says Pascal, a Beninese who has worked and lived in Nigeria for a long time.

Alaba International Market is a huge market located in the western outskirts of Lagos, about 40 kilometers from the Beninese border: the kingdom of tiling. Tiles are imported from China or

produced in local Nigerian factories. Buyers come from very far away to buy sinks, faucets, pots of paint, and fabrics to adorn living rooms. A stone's throw away from this vast warehouse of building materials and furnishings is the grand market of Western electronic products, where new and second-hand items are sold. The Alaba International Market is regionally known for being a huge market, with its adjoining landfill (*e-waste*), where computers, air conditioners and televisions from Europe are piled up and sold to be reused.

## **The second life of objects in Africa**

On the other side of the Benin-Niger border, in the Zongo district, in the shadow of the large Cotonou mosque, refrigerators, flat-screen TVs, bicycles, motorcycle helmets, blenders, etc. are thrown together in giant piles. In the first shop, a man, wearing a long boubou and probably from the north of the country, insists that he only sells quality goods: "These are the 'new arrivals', that is to say, objects that have come in from France and Europe. The Zongo district is immediately reminiscent of the Alaba International Market in Lagos, and the "Arrival" neighborhood in Nouakchott. There are even

products freshly arrived from Europe, but they are soiled or damaged for the most part. Just as in Europe, the sellers here assure their buyers that, though they might be a little “worn down”, their products are of better quality than the new ones from China.

Many objects, vehicles and clothing, considered as used in Europe, are offered a second life in Africa, where a potential clientele of several million people is waiting to consume. The vast market of the poor is the other aspect of globalization, more discreet than that of the big luxury brands. Trade in Africa, whether second hand or new, is closely linked to trading networks that have built up over time, accompanying migrations.

The Lebanese, but also the Hausa, the Igbos, and the Soninkes circulate widely to bring in goods. This market connects a multitude of people of different backgrounds (Western exporters, migrants turned importers, small retailers, occasional customers) and joins unexpected places between Europe, Asia and West Africa.

“You can find anything in Zongo,” we are told. These shops, which resemble the second-hand sales depots or bric-a-brac shops found throughout France, are full of used goods. The Zongo district in Cotonou recalls of course the neighborhood of the same name in the



nearby capital of Lomé. In West Africa, the *zongo* (from the Hausa term which means “place of lodging”) designates the neighborhood where the Muslim traders coming from the north of the country, often Hausa, Fulani or Songhai, gather. These Sahelian groups have extensive experience in long-distance trade. It’s not surprising therefore to find them in this second-hand import-export business. As Amandine Spire explains, “the *zongos* depend economically on the city and, at the same time, the *zongos* are inserted into a cross-linked urban system across West Africa”<sup>50</sup>.

A little further north-west, in the Sahel, the Soninké people, originally from the Senegal River Valley, straddle Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. Long-standing international migrants, they have deployed networks in Africa, Europe and the United States. In Nouakchott, the boutiques in the "Arrival" district are owned and supplied by Mauritanian Soninkees, who specialized in import-export. Second-hand products come directly from the "arrivals" from the port. The managers of these shops began by making round trips, every two or

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<sup>50</sup> A. Spire, *L'Étranger et la ville en Afrique de l'Ouest. Lomé au regard-ci'Accra*, Paris, Karthala, 2011. See also M. Agier, *Commerce et sociabilité. Les négociants soudanais du quartier Zongo de Lomé (Togo)*, Paris, ORSTOM, 1983.

three months, between the Netherlands, Germany and France, where they live and get their supplies, and Nouakchott, where they receive the containers. Over time, they have expanded their markets by using family members who have settled abroad.

In 2008, a trader named Mustapha told us that he got his supplies from his brother, who had emigrated to China. Today, thanks to family members around the world, he travels less and less between each pole of the network (Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Europe, China). He recognizes that it is now more important to know how to move the goods rather than to move oneself. Network heads impose themselves by settling down and letting other circulate in their place.

In Kayes, Mali, the trajectory of an old Soninke trader named Demba, whom we met in 1998 and then again in 2009, traces these exchanges over longer and longer distances. In 1998 Demba was trading grain and groceries. He also sold used equipment. Two of his sons then moved to live in France and Belgium. In Kayes, another son, a former student in the USSR, seconded him. In 2009, when we visited him again, old Demba was retired. His sons had taken over for him.

One of them explains that they have stopped using containers coming from France, and specialize instead in the import-resale of

Asian goods (electricity, plumbing, hardware, tires, furniture, batteries). He operates in Dubai, Shanghai and Canton, where there are many Malians. “But I haven’t been to Dubai in three years,” he admits. I buy on the Internet.” The “Demba and sons” network makes their business flourish: four brothers are in Libreville, two are in Europe, one is in Tunisia, another is in China. And many other people circulate between these places. Old Demba’s conclusion, sitting quietly in front of his 50-inch plasma screen, is eloquent: “I am a notable. I don’t go looking for money any more, it’s the money that comes looking for me.”

Demba’s ascent allows us to see the multiple and new territorial anchors that form a canvas across the African continent, and, more broadly, the entire world. For these entrepreneurial migrants, there is a time for everything: a time to go to others and a time for others to come to you.

## **4x4s and old jalopies**

The “Zongo” or the “Arrivals” neighborhoods are mostly connected to ports, from which come the containers filled not only

with bales of clothes, but also with fridges, hi-fi equipment and thousands of used vehicles. In Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin, everything from the latest models of new 4x4s, to old and rickety jalopies and tractors of another era are unloaded from ships coming from Antwerp. Benin acts as a “warehouse state”<sup>51</sup> and acts as a “hub in the redistribution of vehicles in Africa”.<sup>52</sup>

At the edges of Cotonou, some 120 kilometers from Lagos, thousands of vehicles are parked in fleets. They’re waiting to be bought to be put back into circulation in Nigera. Just as they do with building materials, the Lebanese control this import-export sector: cars are first identified in Brussels by Lebanese, before being shipped by boat to Benin. Three weeks later, in Cotonou, they are received by other Lebanese, who take advantage of differences in customs, taxes and regulations.

At the same time, Beninese importers travel to Brussels to buy and export cars to Cotonou and gain access to the Nigerian

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<sup>51</sup> J. Igué, B. Soulé, *L'État-entrepôt au Bénin. Comment informel ou solution à la crise ?*, Paris, Karthala. 1992.

<sup>52</sup> M. Rosenfeld, “Entrepreneurs transnationaux et commerce d'exportation de véhicules d'occasion: la filière Bruxelles-Cotonou », *Revue européenne du migrations internationales*. vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 57-76.

market. This automobile market has completely reconfigured the eastern outskirts of the city of Cotonou, where Lebanese importers, Beninese mechanics and Nigerian buyers meet. At KP 10 (kilometer point located 10 kilometers from downtown Cotonou), in the giant parking lots, everything is done to accommodate potential Nigerian buyers. The lingua franca is the broken English of Lagos, and Nigerian “Star” beer is the beverage of choice. The hotels are owned by Nigerians.

A little “Nairialand” (in reference to the Nigerian currency, the naira) has grown up in the heart of Benin. There are also Nigerians who earn their livings from the second-hand trade.

## **Death and rebirth of second-hand goods**

Back to downtown Cotonou. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, the Missebo market comes to life. The second-hand market in the heart of the city is visited by everyone from civil servants, students and businesswomen. Since the early morning hours, Nigerians have been opening up bales of clothes that have just come in from Europe, America and China. The bales contain thousands of

pairs of jeans, bras, bodysuits for children, shoes and handbags of all kinds.

Seeing well-ironed t-shirts with Spiderman prints, one can wonder. Where do they come from?

“From France,” says the saleswoman. “It’s good quality.” The activity can be compared to the containers on the streets of Paris and in other cities, which collect used clothes donated by French citizens who are tired of wearing the clothes that are cluttering up their wardrobes. How many times has this t-shirt been sold since it was thrown into such a container? What path did it go down to reach this African market, where it has a second life?

In 2008, seeing the invasion of cheap Chinese clothes in the stalls of African markets, Sylvie Bredeloup and Jerome Lombard wondered about the future of second-hand clothes in Africa.<sup>53</sup> Some ten years later, the cheap used clothing market seems more alive than ever, bringing livelihoods and clothing to thousands of sub-Saharan. The new and cheaply priced products from China didn’t end the second-hand clothing market.

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<sup>53</sup> S. Bredeloup et J. Lombard, “Mort de la fripe en Afrique ou fin d’un cycle ?” *Revue Tiers Monde*, No. 194, 2008, pp. 391-412.

Every major West African city has its second-hand market: Marcory (Abidjan), Missèbo (Cotonou), Makola (Accra), Front de Terre (Dakar), Hédzranawoé (Lomé), Sucu-pira (Praia), etc. Second hand clothing tends to change its name when it travels: it is called *fëggjaay* in Senegal, *okrika* in Nigeria or *abloni* in Togo (derived from *obloni*, itself derived from *à'abroadi*, “those from the outside”, the name given to whites in Ghana, therefore, by extension, “white people clothes”).

Despite the fact that it brings together many different intermediaries, places and large sums of money, the second-hand market nevertheless has a low profile. An item can be resold no fewer than five times, from the moment it was donated in Europe, and then sorted and resold in an African street. In the West, the collection of used clothing largely rests, as it has since the beginning of the 20th century, on charity networks such as Catholic Relief, Salvation Army, Red Cross and Goodwill. Today, the Relais chain of solidarity economy, a textile industry member of Emmaüs France, collects through its 17,000 containers scattered throughout France about 1,800 tons of clothing per week, 90,000 tons per year, of which 55% will

end up in African markets.<sup>54</sup>

The second-hand market is a well-organized, hierarchical and lucrative sector, to the point that there are many blogs on the Internet explaining how to make money easily and quickly by starting up a business. At the head of the West African market, Igbos, from Biafra, in eastern Nigeria. They are importers and wholesalers. In Cotonou, they receive the bales of clothes at the port, often shipped by Westerners. They take advantage of very advantageous customs duties in Benin compared to Nigeria, which prohibits the supply of second-hand clothes.

The famous “London” bales, arriving from England, are the most popular, but are also the most expensive, because they are judged to be of better quality. The other bales come from continental Europe (France, Spain), Canada and China. Nigerians store their goods in sheds or shops in the center of Cotonou, in the immediate vicinity of Missèbo. Igbos wholesalers sell the bales for between 150,000 and 250,000 CFA francs (between 230 and 380 euros). They then open them directly to the market before the semi-wholesalers, often women

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<sup>54</sup> See <http://www.lerelais.org>.



and young men, who buy at least forty pieces, and who are the only ones allowed to inspect the merchandise up close.

Only after the pieces are sold retail, either on the ground in Missèbo (hence the nickname “Monoprix land” given by the Cotonans to this activity), or in the streets by street vendors who offer clothes to passers-by.

People speak of “little Missèbos”, scattered throughout the city. There is also a Missèbo 2, located on the border with Nigeria, and renamed “Biafra Market” by the Igbos (to the point of flying the flag of the former Republic of Biafra). The Igbos have long been present in the second-hand trade and in the region. They settled in and around Cotonou at the time of secession and the Biafra War (1967-1970). It was as a response to the crisis that they introduced and intensified the trade in thrift stores.

This second market, the so-called Biafra Market, was created in 2014, when second-hand clothes merchants had to leave the city center. The authorities chased away the sellers, relocating them to the new market, nearly 25 kilometers from the original place of sale. But, although the market is close to the Nigerian clientele, it is not very lively. Many dealers have refused to follow orders and join this far-

off and empty market.

The same goes for Sinapost at PK 3, another market that has been set up to accommodate second-hand dealers. But, once again, the stalls, with their Nigerian names (Lagos Line and Abuja Market), remain empty and need both more sellers and more buyers. The sellers of second-hand clothes, driven from the city center, preferred to return and resettle illegally in Missèbo, in the immediate vicinity of the pagne merchants.

## **The roads of the pagne dresses**

“People call me Clotesse, like Clotilde, the Countess.”

Clotesse stands in the middle of her shop, a kingdom of pagne dresses. Fabrics with classic imitation Vlisco prints or the latest fashions in loud colors. There is something for every taste. She shows us the samples she has just received from China:

“First they send me photos over WhatsApp, then samples in real life. Because you can never be sure of the colors on the WhatsApp photos. Then you order, again using WhatsApp. It takes two months to get to the port.”

Clottesse travels to China once a year on average. She is one of the few Beninese women to run a shop. “The rest are run by Indians.” In Cotonou, as in Lomé, they have replaced the famous Nana Benz, who made their fortunes in the 1980s and 1990s by marketing all these printed fabrics.<sup>55</sup> These powerful (and powerfully built) women in their gleaming Mercedes, made the Lomé market the subregional hub of the tissue trade in Africa. But today they face competition and imitations.

The renaissance of second-hand clothing didn’t make the parallel market for *wax* (name given to *pagne* dresses in English-speaking countries) dresses disappear completely. *Pagne* dresses continue to be widely worn in West Africa, especially on weekends, where you can see entire families wearing the same print. In fact, there is nothing specifically African about *wax*, despite it being perceived as the African fabric par excellence. Originally from Java in Indonesia, it takes its name from the wax that was originally used to make prints, and it was imported in the nineteenth century by the

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<sup>55</sup> C. Toulabor, “Les Nana Benz de Lomé. Mutations d’une bourgeoisie compradore, entre heur et décadence”, *Afrique contemporaine*, vol. 244, No. 4, 2012, pp. 69-80.

Dutch.<sup>56</sup> They then distributed the fabrics, in particular via the Dutch company Vlisco, which has just celebrated its one-hundred-and-seventy-year anniversary. The company dominates the fashion and luxury market by a wide margin. In all, 64 million meters are produced in Holland, of which 90% is then exported to Africa.

Today, apart from this luxury market, *pagne* dresses are produced mainly in China, but also in Ivory Coast (by Uniwax) and Ghana (by Woodin). The new Vlisco patterns are immediately replicated in the Chinese and Nigerian factories, and these fabrics, known as *fancy*, are sold ten times cheaper. The Nana Benz women, who had made a fortune in the Lomé market, have been replaced by their daughters, who have had to adapt to globalization. Some, like Clottesse, travel directly to China to stock up, like those African businesswomen who find in Yiwu other sisters settled there for several years.<sup>57</sup>

Globalization has therefore opened up new “*pagne* roads”

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<sup>56</sup> See: [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/12/30/comment-le-wax-fait-croire-qu-il-est-africain-et-etouffe-les-vrais-tissus-du-continent\\_5055656\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/12/30/comment-le-wax-fait-croire-qu-il-est-africain-et-etouffe-les-vrais-tissus-du-continent_5055656_3212.html)

<sup>57</sup> C. Lesourd, *Femmes d'affaires de Mauritanie*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

socially mobile women and, with them, the opportunity for thousands of African men and women to wear counterfeit Vlisco patterns at lower prices. Thousands of tons of tissue circulate between China and Africa. And almost as many locks of hair.

## **Locks and braids**

Globalization, for thousands of African women, still means the opportunity to buy locks of artificial hair at reduced prices. A Beninese businessman made his fortune in Nigeria by selling them. Nigeria has 185 million inhabitants, half of which are women who want to change their hairstyles regularly.

The story of M.N. is remarkable. In three decades, he went from a small-time reseller for Chinese merchants in Barbes, Paris, to the leading producer of artificial hair in Nigeria, with three factories in Lagos and no fewer than 7,000 employees. He proudly points out that he is the only African in the business and recalls being one of the pioneers in China in the 1980s. At that time, he helped Chinese people buy locks of hair.

MN quickly became an importer and even the biggest

importer of “popular locks” in Europe, aimed at those with small budgets. From his warehouses located in Seine-Saint-Denis, he supplies the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany and the West Indies. It must be said that the French market is booming, after the arrival of many African women due to the French family reunification policy.

M.N. looks back on his success:

In Paris, in the 1980s, I was the one who started the different fashions. I used to go often to China and Korea. I’d ask to see the ten models that sold well the year before in the United States. I picked out five. And then I looked at the women who were successful in their lives. I made a fortune by launching a model called “lambada”, looking at how the women of the clip were wearing hair.

But he was quickly stirred by another dream: “For me, it was really important to come back and develop Africa. Opening a factory there was my priority. I wanted to build the country and bring Chinese know-how there.”

In the mid-1990s, M.N. inaugurated a hair lock factory in Porto-Novo, Benin’s political capital, less than 10 kilometers from the Nigerian border. He imports resin and fiber from Korea and brings in Chinese workers, some of whom have been with him for twenty years. He quickly discovered that 80% of his production is resold on the other side of the border, in Nigeria. In order to limit his costs and avoid

expenses on customs and transport, he decided to get closer to the market.

He opened his first factory in Lagos. His turnover was very high and M.N. is now proud to announce that he is the largest African artificial hair seller in Africa: “I went up the whole chain, from sales to manufacturing.” He continues to live between Benin, Lagos, China, South Korea and Paris (in the 16th arrondissement, where he owns an apartment). He doesn't sell just artificial hair though. Together with his daughter, who has studied in Europe and Canada, he has diversified the products they market and is now working in the agri-food industry. Their desire: to dethrone the Maggi cube broth from its monopoly in West Africa.

Asking people questions, traveling by bus, visiting and revisiting some places in West Africa, along certain axes, major or not, gives one an idea of the intensity of the exchanges. These trading posts connected by corridors of circulation and consumption are visited by small traders, travelers and migrants. Active members of diasporas or isolated individuals seeking to gain small margins on price differences connect trading places, products and actors, while creating spatial continuity within the discontinuity.

Globalization has thus gained the African village, to which these Chinese products flow. Undeniably, this village is connected to the neighboring city, itself connected to the port of the capital, and from there to a world metropolis where the same goods are bought in large warehouses. Very often, West African, Lebanese, Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs make the link between these objects they set in motion, these trading posts with changing geography and the millions of poor people who come to stock up on them.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **For a geography of other globalizations**

A different conclusion to a research project on transnational objects must be considered as a point of progress in an ongoing process of change, innovation and bifurcation. Territories are constantly being created, spreading and disappearing, connecting an infinite number of scattered places around the planet. Understanding them, though complex, can only be done by grasping the different levels at play, where the local and the global, and the intermediate



levels of regions or States, are traversed by reticular dynamics that constantly modify their shapes.

Globalization and new technologies, the advent of a unique and ultra-connected world, the rise of the aggressive superpowers that are China and India: these patterns don't tell us everything about globalizations, because the reality is much more complex. Maps are being redrawn, far from the traditional oppositions that are increasingly becoming obsolete.

By following the pathways of the exchange of flip-flops, jeans, cement bags, locks of hair, our investigation at various points of the planet has shown that, when the dividing lines begin to disappear, others appear in their place, revealing the importance of anchors and spatial disparities. Many other works lead to similar conclusions, whether they be rickshaw tricycles, Chinese motorcycles or tomato paste.<sup>58</sup> In addition, if the Internet has indeed transformed lifestyles and consumption, and if the trade is more and more on the

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<sup>58</sup> See G. Blundo's work on Chinese motorcycles in Africa and Y. Ph. Tastevin, *Le Rickshaw (1948- ?). A success story. Techniques et culture*, Paris, Ed. de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2012, as well as the investigation undertaken by J.-B. Malet, *L'Empire de l'or rouge. Enquête mondiale sur la tomate d'industrie*, Paris, Fayard, 2017.

Internet (as evidenced by the rise of the platform Alibaba.com, which connects wholesalers and buyers around the world), globalization cannot be limited to this.

Our purpose is not just to offer a series of success stories. It is certainly more tempting and easier to analyze success than failure, because those who tell their stories are in a more comfortable position and more inclined to talk. We must keep in mind, however, that individual or collective failures and setbacks, often caused by the multiple obstacles with which its actors must deal, are inherent to daily life. Economic crises have often been the breeding ground for new inventions, new pathways and winning bets, as well as a times of suffering for the most vulnerable.

We hope that we have demonstrated, through our various examples in different fields, and through the different path linking the various trading posts, that “being poor” can take on variegated and nuanced forms in reality. The South is too often seen as destitute, compared to a wealthy North - a dichotomy that hides both the aspirations of the rising middle classes, on the one hand, and the miserable conditions of the poor on the other.

Because globalization affects these poor people in the most

unexpected domains, we realize that being poor today is also about participating in globalization and wanting to take advantage of it, by doing business, by creating one's own (small) company, building relationships abroad, but also dreaming, traveling, "facebooking" or "whatsapping" and, ultimately, consuming. Some of these people, as discreet as those experiencing other forms of globalization, manage to develop capacities for action and take initiatives to improve their own future. They nurture an inventive, embodied and fully alive form of globalization - and are still too often ignored.

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Globalization is more than just the success of a few multinational companies and the wealth of a minority of rich people. Those who are the most implicated in globalization remain discreet, if not completely invisible. For the last thirty years, transnational exchange routes have been profoundly transformed. They now connect the world's workshop, China, with "the market of the poor" made up of four billion consumers in places like Algeria, Nigeria, or the Ivory Coast. To understand these new "Silk Roads", we must let go of an overly western perspective and look toward more marginalized spaces, where the global practices are being invented that are overturning the global economy. In doing so, we discover an "alter-globalization", from the bottom up, from the viewpoint of those who are creating it.

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