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Requiem for a Rural Hinterland

The Contradictions of Laissez-Faire Regulation and the Urbanisation of Grey Areas in Rabat (Morocco)

Max Rousseau, Maryame Amarouche & Kawtar Salik

Abstract

Morocco provides an interesting framework for re-examining planetary urbanisation in relation to planning policies, which shape spaces that were considered “rural” until now. In Morocco, a country deeply affected by metropolitanisation, the agricultural areas on the periphery of major cities are undergoing rapid economic, social and landscape transformations. City growth is silently disrupting ways of life and economic activities, as well as rural-based social organisations. These changes are critical because Morocco is a country where agriculture and, more generally, “rurality”, is still vitally important. This explains why the relations between the city and the country are deeply affected by the regime’s contradictory new policies. These include: a neoliberal approach, which is undermining the political order for the sake of accumulation, draining the countryside and pursuing urban sprawl; and an authoritarian approach that is designed to preserve the social and political order and involves keeping a tight rein on the rural community, which traditionally supported the regime. To explore these contradictions, we examine the periphery on the east of the Rabat-Salé-Témara region, where the control of urban sprawl provides a particularly interesting perspective when analysing how the authoritarian state has developed in a context of laissez-faire regulation. When urban sprawl interferes with the limits between town and country and fragments peri-urban “grey spaces”, it becomes the focus of bitter negotiation between public and private actors, between social groups and between use value (for the rural population) and exchange value (for state-supported urban investors). The first part examines the power relations between the main actors involved in the urbanisation of Rabat’s grey spaces. The second part explores their impact on rural and farming communities in three successive phases. The first phase examines the recomposition of the state, with the new city model, using the case of Tamesna. The second phase examines the recentralisation of public action to consolidate the metropolitan influence, which involves the agency responsible for developing the Bouregreg Valley in a municipality on the outskirts of Salé. Finally, the third phase focuses on the challenges of reconfiguring state policies in response to the changes caused by urban spread. Here, we examine the case of two rural municipalities in the second ring: Shoul and Sidi Yahya des Zaers.

Seeing planetary urbanisation from the South

Half a century after Henri Lefebvre’s visionary insights into planetary urbanisation, the publication *Implosions/Explosions: towards a study of planetary urbanization* (Brenner Citation2014) questions the relevance of the urban/rural divide. The theory of planetary urbanisation actually suggests “abandoning all the categories that differentiate ‘urban’ from ‘rural’, all those that describe a type of circumscribed site – ‘city’, metropolis, megalopolis, *edge city*, etc. – in short, abandoning the discrete for the continuous, replacing the place by the process (p. 382), substituting the fixed by the dynamic” (Giroud Citation2015). However, this theory derives from observations of places where the industrialisation process has reached completion. Consequently, applying the theory to southern countries, where pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial forms of production co-exist, does not seem that simple. In addition, a growing number of postcolonial studies and, more generally, works from and about

the Global South are questioning the theory's universal scope, by placing it in the framework of the intellectual tradition that emanates from the North. Hence, postcolonial studies suggest that planetary urbanisation should be contextualised in the light of detailed knowledge of local circumstances in the Global South (Robinson Citation2016, Citation2014; Robinson, Roy Citation2016; Brenner 2018).

This article adopts a contextualised approach. Morocco provides an extremely interesting framework for re-examining planetary urbanisation in relation to planning policies, which shape spaces that were considered "rural" until now. In Morocco, a country deeply affected by metropolisation, the agricultural areas on the periphery of major cities are undergoing rapid economic, social and landscape transformations. City growth is silently disrupting ways of life and economic activities, as well as rural-based social organisations. These changes are critical because Morocco is a country where agriculture is still vitally important. Although agriculture's contribution to GDP is declining steadily (it now represents about 14% of GDP), the primary sector still provides a significant number of jobs: 40% of Moroccans earn most of their income from farming. Therefore, it is not surprising that regulating rural and agricultural territories was a public priority for colonial, then postcolonial powers: the French Protectorate, the monarchy and the new urban elites in independent Morocco have long feared national dissent (Desrues Citation2006). As a result, territorial management has concentrated on security issues to consolidate conservatism in the "rural society" around the Ministry of the Interior's tight network, with support from landowners who are appointed by the powers that be (Leveau Citation1976).

This strategy of political stabilisation comes at a price, i.e., greater social control and security-oriented agricultural and rural development projects (Leveau Citation1976). It appears to contradict the theory of "complete urbanisation". Yet, urbanisation and the resulting changes in social relationships are also progressing in Morocco. Continuous urbanisation has been transforming social solidarities and social organisation. In the past, rural Morocco was described as "tribal" (Rachik Citation2020; Leveau Citation1976; Pascon 1974): the agricultural land was owned collectively and the social organisation was collectively managed by the tribe through the *jma'a* (Rachik Citation2020). In 2014, however, the last census shows that 60% of the population is living in an urban area. The upsurge of the market rationale primacy linked to the urbanisation of the society promotes exchange value over use value. This process is well illustrated by the relentless agricultural land commercialisation for urbanisation. This process progressively weakens use value, which was structural in the rural organisation, in which the value was linked to the agricultural (and mostly collective) exploitation of land. Such a process results from the dual impact of the rural exodus (Escallier Citation2001) and the real estate market that has developed under the auspices of the state (Zaki 2011; Rousseau, Harroud Citation2019). The rural exodus is driven by the neoliberalisation of agricultural policy, "imported" by the structural adjustment programme in the early 1980s. It was gradually incorporated by the Moroccan regime, with the 2008 Green Morocco Plan and its liberal vision of agriculture. In addition, it exacerbates territorial inequalities between the growing metropolises and rural areas that have been escheated, sparking new protests that are destabilising the regime (Harroud, Rousseau, to be published). It explains why the relations between the city and the country are deeply affected by the regime's contradictory new policies. These include: a neoliberal approach, which is undermining the political order for the sake of accumulation, draining the countryside and pursuing urban sprawl; and an authoritarian approach that is designed to preserve the social and political order and involves keeping a tight rein on the rural community, which traditionally supported the regime.

To explore these contradictions, which are a feature of public actions to regulate town-country relations, we examine the periphery on the east of the Rabat-Salé-Témara region, one of the main metropolitan areas in Morocco. Its population is soaring (it currently has two million inhabitants). A historical divide exists between the working class north and the rich south, where there is a concentration of political, administrative and police institutional headquarters, as well as middle and upper-class residential areas. The governance of Rabat's urban extension is highly controversial. The rapid extension of the metropolitan area is shaped by the joint action of the central state (organised around the "deep state", which is composed of networks that gravitate around the monarchy, the *Makhzen*) and major private sector actors. The latter enjoy numerous facilities promoted by national policies, exemptions for urban planning and significant tax benefits.

Hence, the control of urban sprawl provides a particularly interesting perspective when analysing how the authoritarian state has developed in a context of neoliberalisation. The green belt around Rabat established under Hassan II could be seen as a move to "clubbify" Rabat (Charmes Citation2011), by making real estate scarce. It could also be seen as marking the clear division between "urban space" and "rural space", which is thought to be a critical factor for maintaining the political balance. Hassan II built his leadership around rural notables, who played a crucial role in the preservation of the social order, while the urban areas were subject to the securitarian policy of the Ministry of the Interior (Leveau Citation1976; Waterbury 1975). However, the end of its reign led to political transformations. In the late 1990s, with the agreement of Hassan II, the long-muffled socialist opposition came to power (Adidi 2010). This led to a proliferation of urban policies, with public investments in state land to promote the production of housing through the support of companies that would soon become the more important actors of real estate development. "Security urbanism" which characterised the "years of lead" of the 1970s and 1980s (Daoud 2007; Rousseau, Amarouche, Charmes 2021) shifted progressively to social housing policies. This evolution was linked to another key shift: a greater porosity between public and private sectors, with the development of public-private partnerships. The current sovereign, Mohammed VI, is deepening this concentration of resources in the major urban centres (Barthel, Mouloudi Citation2009; Bogaert 2011b; Rousseau, Harroud Citation2019; Salik Citation2019; Harroud, Rousseau Citation2021) through flagship projects. The city, not the rural world anymore, is perceived as the locomotive of economic development, modernisation and the fight against exclusion and poverty. The political balance is now being "nibbled" by real estate developers, which reveals the ruling authorities' porosity with regard to private interests. This "opening" is reflected in the way the socio-spatial distribution of populations is being recomposed within the metropolitan area. Hence, when urban sprawl interferes with the limits between town and country and fragments peri-urban areas, it becomes the focus of bitter negotiation between public and private actors, between social groups and between use value (for the rural population) and exchange value (for state-supported urban investors).

This article is based on empirical material collected in the framework of three research projects. The first focused on new cities as a tool for controlling urban sprawl. The second was drawn from a doctoral thesis on peri-urban agriculture in the context of territorial restructuring in the Rabat-Salé-Skhirat-Témara conurbation (Salik 2018). The third focused on how major urban projects impacted subsistence farming in peripheral metropolitan zones (Amarouche 2015; Amarouche, Bogaert Citation2019). Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted with public actors (ministries, advocacy groups, elected representatives and municipal technicians, local authorities, an urban and planning agency, engineering offices and inhabitants) in the first and second suburban rings. The aim was to highlight the contradictions apparent in the public

policies applied in rural zones subject to urbanisation and their consequences for the development of these areas.

The first part examines the power relations between the main actors involved in territorial development. We analyse the contradictions that shape the peripheral spaces (see

). The second part explores their impact on rural and farming communities on the periphery of Rabat-Salé-Témara in three successive phases. The first phase examines the recomposition of the state, with the new city model, using the case of Tamesna. The second examines the recentralisation of public action to consolidate the metropolitan influence, which involves the agency responsible for developing the Bouregreg Valley in a municipality on the outskirts of Salé. The third focuses on the challenges of reconfiguring state policies in response to the changes caused by urban spread. Here, we examine the case of two rural municipalities in the second ring: Shoul and Sidi Yahya des Zaers (SYZ).

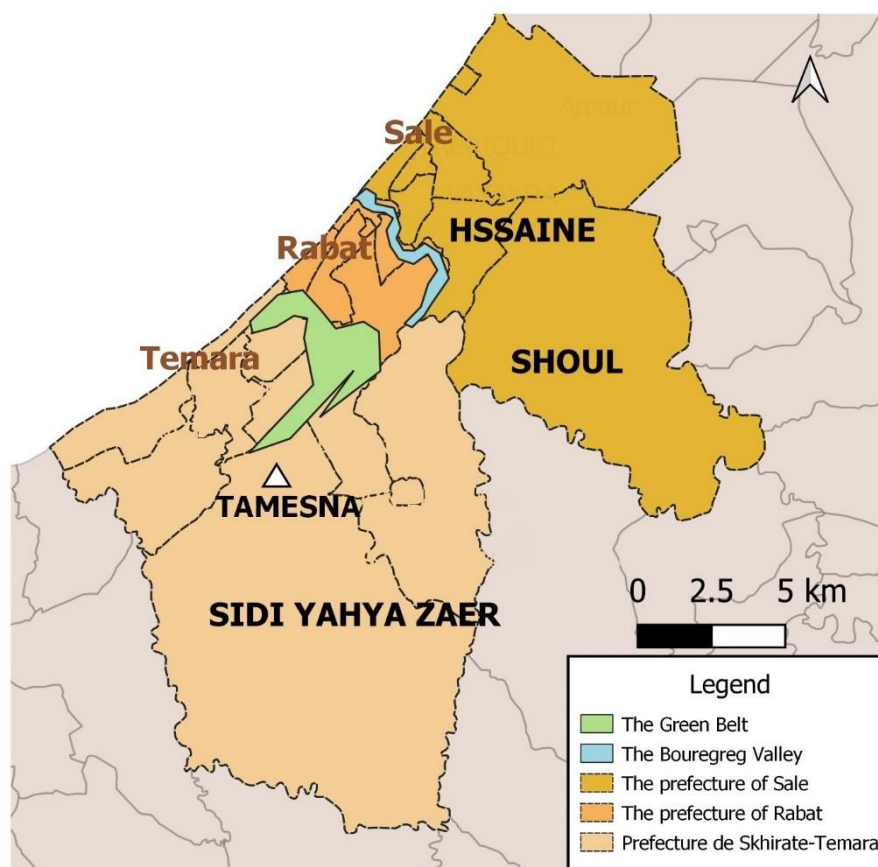


Fig. 1: Positioning map of the study sites (Maryame Amarouche).

The contradictions of the “urban”– “rural” divide

Between the claim that national policies are complementary ...

Owing to the urban pressure in Morocco’s major cities, metropolitan peripheries are extremely strategic sites. The shift from food-producing belts to land reserves calls into question how the outskirts are regulated. They are still marked by rurality, their physical environment, their

agricultural economy, and lastly, by their social and political organisation, which bears traces of tribal organisation. These contextual elements mean that these areas can be qualified as “rural”. They are consolidated by the public administration’s distinction between so-called “urban” and “rural” municipalities. This distinction shapes public action and generates antagonism between the two types of territory. It also determines how responsibilities are distributed between the public actors working in “urban” areas (including all the responsibilities linked to land planning and housing), led by the Ministry of Urban Development, Housing and Land Planning; and the other actors associated with “rural” areas, i.e., actors from the farming community, supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture and its various decentralised agencies and services.

The separation between “urban” and “rural” actually provides a structure in a country like Morocco. Historically, the ruling powers used it to enhance their political control, especially during the decades following independence, which were marked by anti-royal protests (by students and workers) in major cities. However, at the start of his reign in the early 2000s, the new King Mohammed VI targeted the major cities, by gearing his national policies towards urban development and competitiveness (Barthel 2008; Mouloudi Citation2015; Bogaert 2011a). However, the central power took care to maintain the allegiance in rural areas in order to keep the peace. Thus, on a national scale, the agricultural development programme, the “Green Moroccan Plan”, launched in 2008 was the corollary of major urban projects, such as the “cities without slums” programme or the huge development projects in the Bouregreg Valley (Rabat, Salé) and the Marchica Lagoon (Tangier Nador) (Bogaert 2011a), launched in 2004, 2005 and 2008, respectively.

On a regional scale, the goal to make the metropole more attractive was reflected in the huge public investments to develop the centres, the infrastructure and their international influence. Achieving this goal requires the “release of strategic land”, a term that hides a dual strategy of expropriation and displacement. Through urban renewal, public actors and their private partners appropriate land and buildings occupied by low-income populations in slums or informal districts. This involves moving facilities considered a nuisance, such as abattoirs, wholesale markets, bus stations, polluting industries, etc., to the periphery. These displacements involve a move to the fringe municipalities in the second ring, which are categorised as “rural municipalities”. They are supposed to encourage farming activities (according to the national strategy), which are still presented as being central to the Moroccan economy. The Green Moroccan Plan reflects this political goal and has a budget of 20 billion dirhams. It was extended from 2020 by the “Generation Green 2020–2030” programme. The peripheral areas have since revealed the central state’s contradictions with, on the one hand, its ambitious goals of metropolitan influence and, on the other hand, the drive to maintain and consolidate national agricultural production.

These contradictions are particularly apparent on a local scale. The desire to control urbanisation in a capital city, which serves as a showcase for Morocco, is illustrated by the creation of an urban agency in Rabat-Salé in 1992. The agency immediately launched a series of development plans for the urban and rural municipalities on the fringe. The 1995 blueprint set out to limit urbanisation to clearly defined areas. However, this strategy came up against the consequences of an earlier political choice: to create a green belt (2000 hectares), separating the capital from the surrounding towns to avoid connecting Rabat with the nearby municipalities. The creation of the green belt reflected the rise in an “authoritarian urbanism” and the regime’s clear desire to tighten social control in major cities marked by the violent protests in the 1980s (against the structural adjustment plan).

In the end, the land shortage in Rabat caused by the green belt, which closed off the city, and the subsequent rise in real estate prices, triggered the massive redeployment of major urbanisation operations to the peripheral rings of the conurbation, notably, in the east. The blueprint was systematically bypassed and productive agricultural land disappeared as a result of intense land speculation on the fringes of the conurbation. The situation brought together farmers keen to sell their land, developers keen to build and local councils qualified to modify land use:

“Twice as many building lots are sold than apartments: they are sold and exchanged but no one builds on them. Just compare Skhirat ten years ago and today. The local councils use tremendous pressure to open up these areas to urbanisation” (interview, urban agency).

... and the grading of spaces at a local level

The growing controversies over the urban spread in Rabat-Salé-Témara reflect the increasing contradictions in Morocco’s public action, both between and within ministries. In the early 2000s, the Ministry of Agriculture challenged urban sprawl and peri-urbanisation in terms of the excessive use of agricultural land and the long-term threat to food sovereignty in Morocco. Paradoxically, senior officials in the urban planning department now seem to be more concerned about the problem of the loss of farmland to urbanisation than officials in the agricultural departments. Town planning officials regularly express concern about the “rapid and rash” urban spread and its consequences on society and agriculture due to the exemptions^{Footnote¹} that are implicitly granted by order from above. The most recent development plans for the conurbation evoke the importance of preserving farmland and the need to orient urbanisation to less fertile zones. However, the plans reflect the objective of metropolitan competitiveness, thereby, forcing peri-urban agricultural spaces to compete directly and unfairly with other more profitable economic activities that create more jobs.

However, the Ministry of Agriculture’s official activism to preserve agricultural land from rampant urbanisation and speculation conceals deep divisions. Lastly, the interest given to farmland seems to depend on its characteristics. Since most plots are small, under-mechanised and low yielding, senior officials at the Ministry of Agriculture are even less concerned about the fact that they are threatened by urbanisation. According to one official at the provincial agricultural board:

“Some farms produce the same amount as an entire rural municipality on the periphery and so they deserve more attention (...) In Morocco, we don’t have a production problem, but a marketing problem” (interview, provincial agricultural board).

These discourses show how public policies rank and value types of agriculture. The Green Morocco Plan, which gives precedence to large farms, is part of the process to liberalise the economy and improve competitiveness. Near the large cities, the regulation of the rural periphery is shaped by tribalism, which survived colonialism (Rajjalallah-Bodinier Citation1990; Rachik Citation2020). It has been weakened by the progress of urbanisation, coupled with other recent changes: rural exodus, the population’s level of education, climatic hazards, land divisions, etc. These phenomena eventually produced the emergence of “grey areas”, neither “urban” nor “rural”, on the peripheries of Rabat. These grey areas have been subject to a short period of “laissez-faire”, which in turn produced rampant suburbanisation without relying on urban planning documents. Ultimately, these processes have a twofold impact on agriculture: quantitative, with the reduction in the number of farms; and qualitative, with the shift to peasant

farming at best and interstitial subsistence farming at worst. We will illustrate these successive shifts with four different examples of suburbanisation: Tamesna, Hssain, SYZ and Shoul.

When the city advances into the rural periphery

The new city or the contradictions of urban growth

The early 2000s were marked by a shift in the problem of urban spread on the outskirts of the conurbation. With the change in reign, the state adopted a new approach to the planning and control of peri-urbanisation. This revealed hidden conflicts between the different ministries, as well as the creation of a new alliance between the state and growing real estate interests. The alliance was keen to maximise the value of peripheral agricultural land. In the Rabat-Salé-Témara conurbation, the most important and most controversial operation is the new city of Tamesna, located 20 km from the capital. From the outset, it was based on two contradictory principles, namely, to absorb a large share of the slum population at minimum cost and to provide a model of “social diversity” and “urban sustainability”. The origin of the megaproject actually stems from the government’s difficulty to achieve its ambitious goal to build 100 000 social housing units per year. It soon came up against the shortage of available land, as well as the rising demand from developers and large real estate groups for building land. The government decided to mobilise state-owned land (managed by the society in charge of agricultural land management), where a quality vineyard had been cultivated for export. This can be interpreted as a decision to sacrifice Rabat’s rural hinterland. The sacrifice, however, was not successful, since several developers abandoned the building after the crisis of the late 2000s, leaving behind them an unachieved satellite town that has more to do with a peri-urban archipelago of housing blocks than with a city of its own (Harroud, Rousseau 2019).

The origin of the project provides an interesting perspective for measuring the existing contradictions in the Moroccan government with regard to how the traditional divide between “urban space” and “rural space” is being challenged. The Ministry of Urban Planning rejects any major infringement of the urban planning blueprint and the Ministry of Agriculture is losing an important reserve of quality agricultural land. In addition, the Ministry for Housing is facing firm opposition from the Ministry of the Interior on the grounds that there is a lack of control because the new commune does not have the resources to guarantee security on its territory. These antagonisms make the new city’s mission even more vital: to demonstrate that social diversity can be used successfully as a new method to control poor populations. This social control method has already been tested in poor districts in major European cities (Rousseau 2015). Its importation to Morocco directly challenges the Ministry of the Interior’s authoritarian use of zoning as a means to keep order. In Tamesna, the pacification of former slums must result from day-to-day interactions, as poor populations come into contact with social groups that are more integrated into the new city. This makes Tamesna an interesting example of the neoliberalisation of social control. In addition, and more generally, it reveals how the authorities are promoting “urban society” in the absence of land control, which has triggered intense land speculation on the fringes of the new city.

The new city has encountered problems. Finding a quick way to overcome the traditional divide between “urban space” and “rural space”, which the authorities see as the guarantee of the regime’s stability, is complex. Initially managed by Al Omrane, Tamesna was supposed to be integrated into the perimeter of the rural commune of SYZ. However, SYZ was unable to guarantee all the services required for a population of several thousand people. The rural commune does not have the human or financial resources to meet its obligations for the whole population. For example, it does not have a single truck for refuse collection.



Fig. 2: Landscaping of the former agricultural land before the creation of the satellite city (2005).(Source: Google Image, by Kawtar Salik) ---- Fig. 3: Tamesna, a post-crisis peri-urban archipelago, today (2018).(Source: Google Image, treatment by Kawtar Salik)

Ultimately, the urbanisation of a large area of agricultural land on the outskirts of Rabat reveals a series of contradictions between the national public policy objectives and how they were applied locally. Given this situation, the project and its initial goals were bound to fail. The phase to encourage a maximum amount of investment and delegate peri-urbanisation to developers gave way to megaprojects in which the public authorities attempted to tighten their control on urbanisation. In the RabatSalé-Témara conurbation, for example, this is the case with the major development project on the banks of the Bouregreg River, which is being supervised by a public agency created *ex nihilo*. As we will see, although the “recentralisation” of peri-urbanisation aims to curb “anarchic” peri-urbanisation, it fails to provide better protection for rural activities and ways of life.



Fig. 4: A dilapidated advertisement for new villas in Tamesna.(Photo: Rousseau)

Recentralising planning: towards (very) urban agriculture

The Bouregreg Valley development project is one of the major urban projects to emerge after King Mohammed VI acceded to the throne. The investment project on the banks of the Bouregreg River, between the cities of Rabat and Salé, is set in an area of 6000 hectares of urban, natural and agricultural land. The project uses the rhetoric of sustainable urban development. On the one hand, it seeks to protect the valley's natural and agricultural spaces from nuisances and, on the other hand, it sets out to develop transport infrastructure and structural facilities (hospital, museum, theatre), in an approach that embraces heritage, architecture and landscape. While the first phases of the project concerned a largely urban environment (apart from the river mouth, which also has wetlands), much of the project affects natural and agricultural areas. This proportion makes the valley's development a contradiction in terms. While striving to preserve agricultural activities, the Bouregreg Valley Development Agency (AAVB) is negotiating with landowners and the beneficiaries of collectively owned land^{Footnote²} involved in small-scale or subsistence farming. The agency proposes that farmers give up the land required for the project in return for compensation for their activity (agricultural or other) and alternative housing arrangements (building plot or apartment). These proposals were met with strong opposition as soon as the project was launched (Mouloudi Citation2013; Amarouche, Bogaert Citation2019).

In order to understand the logic behind the current development of the riverbanks of the Bouregreg, we examine the evolution of the Hssain district, a former rural commune that became a district of Salé in 2003. As a result of the rural exodus, the district's population increased significantly, rising by 2.74% between 2004 and 2014, compared to 1.59% in the entire district for the same period. Numerous residential projects were developed, such as the new city of Sala el Jadida, as well as other informal districts and slums. The district has another interesting feature, namely, it is one of the most affected by the development project in the Bouregreg Valley. The Bouregreg Valley Development Agency (AAVB) was set up by the central authorities to coordinate planning in the strategic zone between the two "rival" communes of Rabat and Salé. It has taken over urban planning, which was formerly the responsibility of elected representatives and technicians (Bogaert Citation2011; Amarouche, Bogaert Citation2019; Mouloudi Citation2016). The agency's technicians actually describe Hssain as the "missing urban piece" for the "coherent management" of the agglomeration (interview).

"Re-centralising" peri-urbanisation

The agency AAVB was assigned "three tasks: planning, development and city supervision" in its zone (interview with an AAVB executive). Its employees combine territorial planning with preservation and development (Mouloudi 2009). Until recently, this zone was a genuine "spatial fringe" of the conurbation (Florin, Semmoud Citation2014), with a concentration of numerous environmental problems (such as soil pollution and rubbish dumps). In this context, the agency claims to have the power to deregulate informal urban development, which is seen as the main cause of the valley's degradation. It also aims to define a global vision for the valley that fits into the grand design to develop the capital.

Therefore, the agency's vision is part of a renewed urban strategy (Philifert Citation2010), which can be qualified as "project vision" (Pinson Citation2009; Barthel, Mouloudi Citation2009). The district is part of an area that is being totally transformed with the creation of the new city of Sala el Jedida and the Rabat-Salé technopole, a project which, over and above higher education, aims to attract companies from the tertiary sector. It also includes several housing programmes. On the capital's doorstep, the district's low densityFootnote³ also attracts urban dwellers who want to enjoy a peri-urban lifestyle close to nature, but still be near the capital.

Although it is closely controlled by the agency, the urban incursion has changed social relationships in this long-standing fringe zone. The shift began before the agency was established, with the arrival of new inhabitants drawn by the exchange value. A resident explains what motivated him to move to Hssain:

"My wife wanted to buy in Hay-Riad [an upmarket new district in the south of Rabat] but I was against [it], so I bought 10 000 m² here for 600 000 dirhams, which is twenty times as much for half the price. I had the intuition that this place would change (...), it's not being nibbled at, it will be totally swallowed. It will become [part of] the city. But the price didn't rocket straight away because people don't understand what 'urban with an agricultural vocation' is. They think it's rural" (interview).



Fig. 5: Example of informal districts present in the valley that the agency wishes to reabsorb and stop development. (Photo: Maryame Amarouche)

The rate of mutation accelerated when the agency was created. Its mere presence triggered an increase in the number of city dwellers moving to the area, even before the project was launched. It intensified the number of requests for urbanisation from existing residents. On seeing the initial phases of the project, residents realised what their land could be used for. Knowing that they would be excluded from the project, they tried to urbanise the valley as much as possible. They requested high fees for constructability in the framework of the development plan as a way of maximising the sale price for their land. One of the agency's associates in charge of organising a consultation with residents explained:

“You have claims for basic services and then you have other stuff, for example, there was a very aggressive gentleman at the start who demanded ‘I want a building’. You could tell the guy was very modest. ‘But are you going to build?’ (...) People don't really know how much it would cost, they imagine that if they have zoning, they will ask for the maximum number of storeys and once they have it, they will be able to add value to it” (interview, consultancy).

Nonetheless, the agency's vision of urbanisation is based on the attractiveness of the entire Bouregreg project. It also takes into account the distribution of the valley's natural amenities: it is not a question of welcoming *all* the city dwellers or constructing a territory with no informal housing or subsistence farming. In terms of territorial competitiveness, the valley's natural and agricultural spaces are seen as a significant comparative advantage for the capital. This is in line with the standards of sustainable urban development. When an apparently efficient agency is in charge of urban planning, it must serve the capital's urban goals. The main challenge for planning is “upgrading” Salé in relation to Rabat's metropolisation. The valley's inhabitants are involved in practices that are marginalised and classed as “informal”, such as self-build and subsistence farming. “Grassroots” or “subaltern” development in the valley (Roy Citation2011; Zerah 2019) has been rejected. Instead, formal urbanisation and “urbanised” agriculture are controlled by the agency in line with its vision. An association coopted by the agency refers to “the lack of hotels and leisure activities”, “the lack of centrality and middle-class activities” in the city of Salé and, lastly, “the lack of dynamic and chic districts, like the district of Agdal in Rabat” (interview). Therefore, the challenge for the agency is to diversify the residential and recreational offerings in Salé, by including tourism and hotel projects in the area, but also by developing “nature” leisure activities. Thus, the Bouregreg agency has developed a clearly “urban” vision for the valley and the rural space, by transferring urban planning tools and a “project vision” to a valley where natural and agricultural spaces are prevalent.



Figure 6: Panoramic view of the Bouregreg Valley.(Photo: Maryame Amarouche)

Urbanisation and interstitial agriculture

Low-yielding farming systems unsuited to intensive production can be found throughout Hssain's territory. Interstitial farming (Dauvergne Citation2011) includes livestock, plantations (avocado, olive, etc.) and market gardening. It involves small businesses that supply local shops and provide households with a supplementary income. Although farming activities continue, the Chamber of Agriculture describes Salé as a completely urbanised zone. In this way, urbanisation becomes a process that inexorably forces farmers to move to more remote areas. Ultimately, Salé's agricultural decline is due to several factors. Apart from this political neglect, the public institution in charge of agricultural development (prevention of rural exodus, sale of seeds, etc.) has closed. State restructuring gives free rein to local actors, who have more to gain from urbanisation than from agriculture (as noted in the interviews). In addition, the speculation strategies and the influx of new populations mean that farmers can make more money by selling their land than by investing to modernise their farm production system.

When we looked more closely at how agricultural activities are taken into account in the project framework, the first thing we noted was the agency's lack of agricultural expertise. Thus, farming is largely considered in terms of its relation to the urban. For example, in the case of the population housing programmes, the agricultural activity and the transfer thereof are the farmer's responsibility. The agency has no information on the number of farmers or farms and does not measure land speculation or farm yields (interview with the Bouregreg agency). While zoning is designated for agriculture in zones that cannot be urbanised because of the need for dam inundation areas, the agency aims *in fine* to develop new recreational pursuits to meet the expectations of city dwellers. There is a move to transform food-growing areas into leisure areas. Leisure activities already existed in the area, but they were small-scale and largely private initiatives. The relationship with nature tends to focus on an aesthetic and landscape vision,

geared to socially selective green tourism. Eco-gentrification is based on a dual dynamic: the displacement of the valley's residents, orchestrated by the agency (by buying land or rehousing slum dwellers), if their activities do not correspond to the project vision; and the promotion of eco-tourism in partnership with private investors. A sort of "urbanisation of nature" is taking place, supported by the rise in the upper-middle class and tourism, similar to educational farms, landscaped gardens and golf courses:

"In our view, when we develop a golf course, it also livens up the city because it fits into a global vision between Benslimane-Mohammedia-Rabat-Kenitra. There is an opportunity to develop a golf destination, which fits into a programme for a tourist site. The city of Rabat has golf courses (...) but one or two golf courses aren't enough to make a golf destination. Studies show that golfers prefer playing on three or four different courses when they are on holiday, so we have to diversify the offer in this area" (interview, Bouregreg agency).

This new urban demand for quality products and a new relationship with "nature" is also spreading throughout Morocco, notably among the urban upper-middle class. The transformation of the natural space on the fringe of the conurbation, from a productive space to an area of consumption for well-off city dwellers, perpetuates the unequal distribution of populations and economic activities within the metropolitan region. It also calls into question the future of peripheral areas and fringe spaces in general. Beyond the discourse on sustainable urban development and the need to preserve non-urbanised spaces within the city, the aim of the Bouregreg Valley development project is the social "upgrading" of the outskirts of Rabat-Salé. The Bouregreg Valley project is a clear example of how neoliberal policies have spread to the different spheres of public action and to the region as a whole. The areas that were marginalised before now are no exception. How will the continuing advance of urbanisation affect the people who used these spaces traditionally, the farmers, first and foremost?

The agricultural hinterland: is the laissez-faire attitude to the public policy "grey area" a way to prepare the ground for urban extension?

To answer this question, we now propose looking at the actors in the agricultural sector in the communes of SYZ and Shoul. This territory is classified as "rural" and seems to be the object of a laissez-faire attitude. It has not benefitted from urban policies, which have concentrated on the new city and the commune's village centre. Agricultural actors, although present, have not developed specific policies to preserve farming there either. Unlike the two earlier examples, there are no major urban projects on the horizon. Both territories lack basic infrastructure. While 80% of the population has access to electricity, most drinking water comes from fountains and wells. There are no sewage systems in either of the rural communes and most discharge is dumped. Both communes lack sanitary facilities and secondary school facilities, which means their populations depend on Salé, Témara and, especially, Rabat, 20 km away. However, the territory is undergoing major changes, which highlight the contradictions already observed. The difference here is that the communes of SYZ and Shoul still have a significant percentage of farmers, farms and agricultural plots.

Territories with low agricultural yields, dominated territories

Most agriculture in the valley is characterised by family farms. However, the commune of SYZ is much larger, covering 59 200 ha (compared to the capital, which covers 11 850 ha) and the percentage of people working in farming is not insignificant, given the commune's

locationFootnote⁴. Like many peripheral communes on the edge of cities, SYZ did not receive huge investments in the national agricultural policy framework. Despite the increasingly urgent discourse on the need to preserve their food production, Morocco has no specific agricultural policies for the metropolitan hinterlands. In addition, like the commune of Hssain, most farms in both of the communes are small. In fact, the average farm size in the *douars* ranges from 10 to 20 ha and there are only four in Shoul and five in SYZ. In the other *douars*, the average farm size varies from 1 to 9 ha.

The small size of average farms encourages farmers to diversify their production systems. Several do not limit their activity to their individual farm but rent land or join forces with other producers to improve yields. The local authorities suggest that the main reason why farmers are reluctant to rent or farm in partnership is their lack of confidence. This weakens the traditional tribal principles of solidarity. Most land in the two communes is *melk* (private property), apart from two *douars* in Shoul, where 68% and 83% of the productive farmland is in the public domain. The commune also has collectively owned land spread across three *douars*. About a dozen *douars* also have publicly owned land. The ratio between the useful farmland and the number of tractors per *douar* highlights the under-mechanisation in the two communes, particularly in certain *douars*, such as the *douar* of Oulad Issa (Shoul, one tractor per 600 ha) or the *douar* of Dlim (SYZ, one tractor for 300 ha). *Bour* (rainfed agriculture) is prevalent in all the *douars* in the two communes. The local authorities describe farmers who are native to the rural communes as poor traditional peasant farmers who do not have the means to equip their small farms. Irrigated land is usually owned exclusively by investors who are *barranis*Footnote⁵ and the rural gentry. Given the low rainfall, cereals are the main crop in the different *douars* (wheat, barley and oats). Fruit trees and greenhouse crops are more usually found on large farms, especially in the different *douars* in the commune of SYZ. Surplus production only concerns the large farms with several dozen hectares or more. Most farmers struggle to produce enough food for their home consumption.

Urban spread and its consequences

Urban pressure is apparent in the price difference per hectare, which depends on where the *douar* is situated, as well as where the land is located within the *douar* (in terms of accessibility). The price differential for land is increasing, with particularly high prices towards the city of Salé in the case of Shoul and towards Témara for the commune SYZ – the price per hectare can reach up to 2 million dirhams in some *douars* in both communes. Almost all of the *douars* have been affected by sales in the past five years. Landowners give up some or all of their land for different reasons, such as improving their living conditions, equipping the rest of their land, debt repayment or exodus to the city. The people who buy land may be native to the *douar* when the price is affordable, but most are wealthy *barranis*, especially in the north of the two communes, nearest the conurbation. In the communes in Shoul, *barranis* who buy plots of land generally use them for a second home. In the commune of SYZ, second homes have also developed, as well as investments in the agrifood industry.

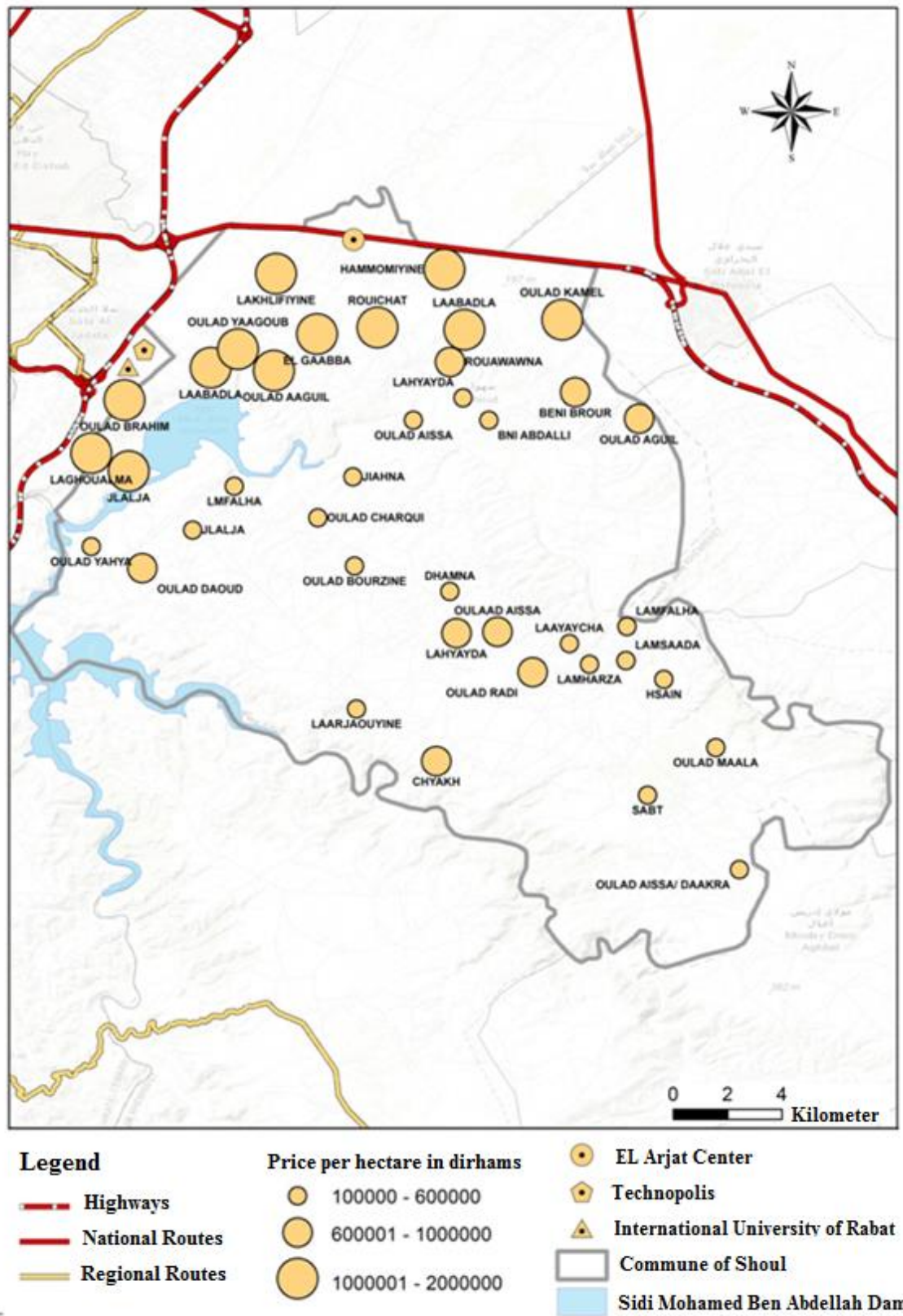


Fig. 7: Price in dirhams per hectare in the douars in the rural commune of Shoul.(Source: Kawtar Salik)

“We have a middle class that has decided to move to the outskirts because you can buy a villa for the price of an apartment in Hay Riad. That means populations have twice as many cars and that is detrimental to farmland. The products that work (...) is building villas. That will be the future trend. Shoul is under enormous pressure. We were very clear: if the developer wants to build farms, that’s fine. But not small villas” (interview, urban agency).

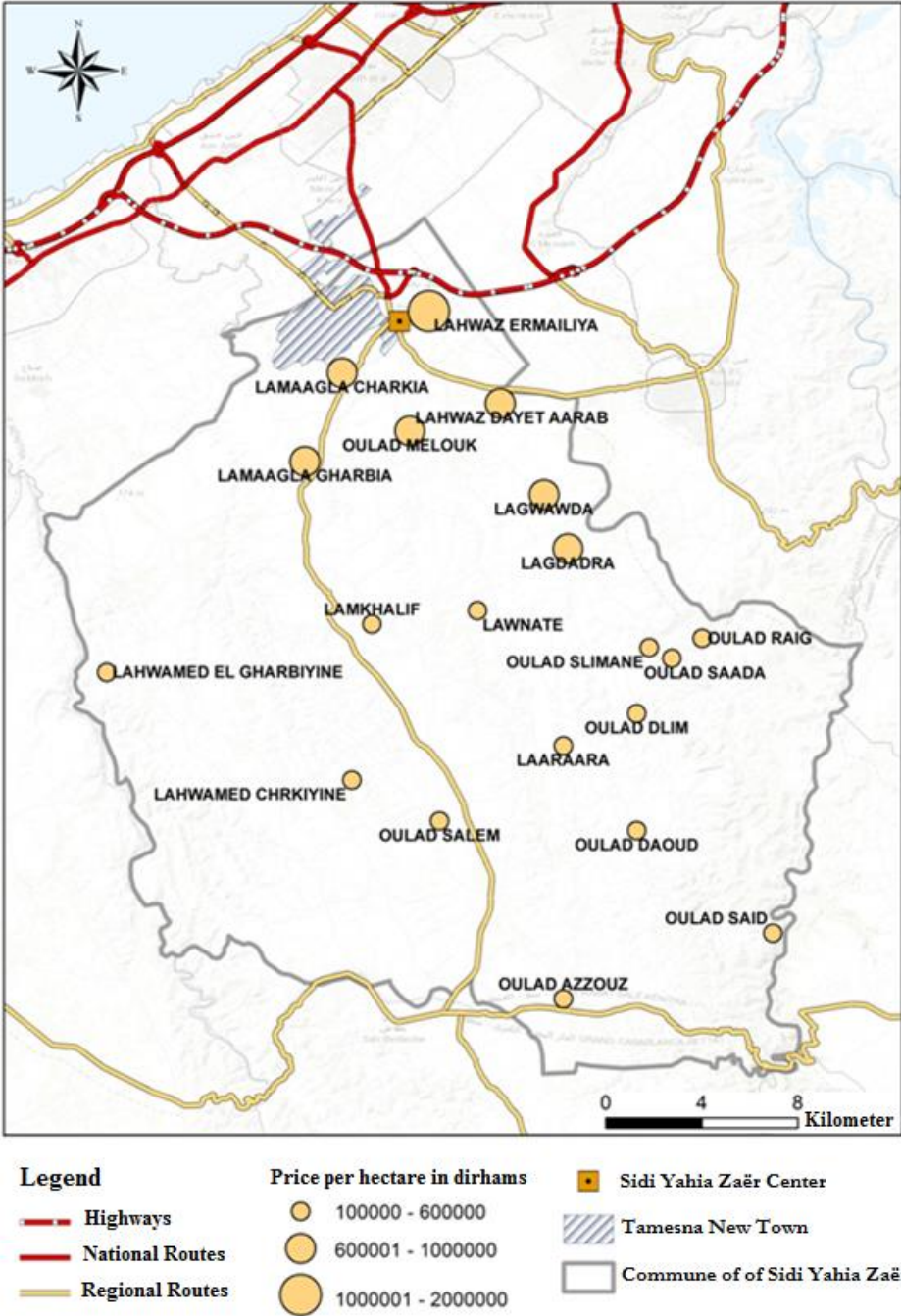


Fig. 8: Price in dirhams per hectare in the douars in the rural commune of Sidi Yahia Zaer.

(Source: Kawtar Salik)

The peripheral areas near the centres are targeted in order to accommodate this urban demand, while production-oriented agricultural policies are geared to the strategic, highly productive land elsewhere on national territory. The public actors responsible for the agricultural sector have expressed concern about the urbanisation of land in the irrigated zones in the productive regions (Agadir, Beni Mellal), despite the fact that it is strictly illegal. The agricultural actors responsible for the peri-urban zones claim to be relatively powerless: even if they defend farming, they do not have the tools for counter urbanisation. According to the actors we met, agriculture is only defended in the big competitive farming regions. On the metropolitan fringes, it is sacrificed for urbanisation and large prestigious projects (that require land, in particular). In other words, on the urban fringes, the balance of power between the different public actors clearly encourages those in favour of urbanisation.

Lastly, apart from this rationale of expropriation, which is central to neoliberal development policies (El Kahlaoui Citation2018; Roy Citation2017), the urban society's approach is generating a new form of dependence in the rural community. By sanctioning agricultural production with a system of urban compensation, rural economies gradually become culturally, technologically and economically obsolete (Pearse Citation1971). In the outskirts of Rabat, this "dependence" operates on two levels: the production system and the mobility from country to town. For the production system, farmers close to the slums tend to abandon arboriculture and growing corn because of repeated thefts (for example in the *douar* of Oulad Alal). Small farmers actually prefer keeping a few cows rather than sheep to produce dairy products for sale in town, which they sell to dairy cooperatives or near the main road that goes through their *douar*. With regard to town-country mobility, farming families operate in two different complementary ways: they are based in their residential area and travel to other Moroccan territories. Generally, children leave rural areas to work in the city in the informal sector. Their financial contribution means that smallholdings can subsist and, in turn, supply food to the city.



Fig. 9: Urban sprawl on the agricultural land in the North of Shoul (douar Laabadla) between 2000 and 2017.(Source: Google Images, treatment by Salik)

Conclusion: requiem for a rural hinterland

In Morocco, the urbanisation of the highly fertile rural lands of the Atlantic coast are the result of the formation of a recent “laissez-faire” coalition bringing together powerful public and private actors, after the collapse of the previous “rural regime” due to the neoliberal reforms implemented in the 1980s. It is especially striking in the capital: in the Rabat-Salé-Témara conurbation, peri-urban land has come to incarnate “the hen that lays the golden eggs” (interview, 2017). As many observers note, such a process is likely to threaten the country’s food security over time (interview, urban agency, November 2014). This is why the Ministry of Agriculture recently organised two operations. First, it decided to prohibit any exemptions for urban projects on agricultural land. Second, it conducted an impact study on the urbanisation of farmland and drafted an action plan to protect agricultural land around urban and rural centres. However, it is too early to tell whether this recent attempt to protect agricultural activities will suffice to counter the powerful forces behind urban sprawl in Morocco.

However, what is clear is that the gradual shift of the regulation of the rural hinterland of Rabat-Salé-Témara over the last decades reveals, therefore, the deep contradictions in the regulation of urbanisation in a major city of a Southern country, where agriculture, despite its declining economic role, still holds a crucial political and social function. The Bouregreg Valley project recentralises territorial development. In this case of a “showcase” space, urbanisation is tightly controlled. By contrast, in rural communes of the second ring, peri-urbanisation seems to be more spontaneous. This process reflects deep state contradictions. The state security rationale has been reshaped as a result of neoliberalisation. In turn, this process deepens segregation: the poor are relegated to newly created suburban territories (the so-called “new cities”, cut off from the city and its job opportunities), where they live close to areas of “peri-urban gentrification”. This peri-urbanisation also weakens rural communities: the “urban revolution” changes social relationships. Urban sprawl is reflected in the new “city” uses that are emerging in the peripheral zones. As local quality agriculture is developing to supply a growing urban middle class, the conurbation’s food-producing areas are gradually disappearing. The examples presented in this paper show how generalised urbanisation spreads spatially. However, these examples, which come from a Southern country, also show the need to complement this approach with empirical realities that can be observed elsewhere. They display mechanisms of resistance and a hybridisation of the urban and the rural that corresponds better to non-industrialised societies in which the agricultural sector remains crucial, such as Algeria (Maachou, Otmane 2016), Egypt (Denis 2006) or India (Zérah 2020). The urbanisation of the rural hinterland dispossesses a significant part of the population, which finds refuge in the urban interstices, in informality and in a subsistence agriculture that urbanisation precisely endangers. This brutal process is backed by the construction of a regulatory and legislative framework that encourages urbanisation through urban planning documents, masterplans and even through agricultural plans – and the main one, “Green Morocco Plan”, does not include the rural hinterlands of big cities, implying that nothing can prevent their urban destiny. In Morocco, like elsewhere, the “urban condition” is made up of dispossession, eviction, and injustice.



Fig. 10: Land clearance and residual pastoralism in the outskirts of Rabat. (Photo: Rousseau)

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