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Town twinning

Over the (ir)relevance of the paradiplomacy of European cities

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A satellite night view of Europe, where the landmasses are dark and the city lights are bright yellow and orange, creating a glowing pattern across the continent. The background is a deep blue-black space.

Urban Europe

Fifty Tales of the City

EDITED BY

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen

Urban Europe

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Fifty Tales of the City

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen (eds.)

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Contents

Acknowledgements	13
1. Urban Europe and the European Union	15
An introduction	
<i>Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen</i>	

Part 1 Citizenship

2. At home in the city?	23
The difference between friendship and amicability	
<i>Jan Willem Duyvendak and Fenneke Wekker</i>	
3. A tolerant social climate?	31
Questioning the validity of an overly positive self-image	
<i>Thijl Sunier</i>	
4. Sex and the city	37
Room for sexual citizenship	
<i>Gert Hekma</i>	
5. The city as integration mechanism?	45
Active, integrated migrants require an active government	
<i>Jeanine Klaver and Arend Odé</i>	
6. Undocumented immigrants	51
Between exclusion and inclusion	
<i>Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas and Sébastien Chauvin</i>	
7. From Mokum to Damsko and back again?	59
Deep language diversity and the new urbanity	
<i>Virginie Mamadouh and Nesrin El Ayadi</i>	

8. Schools in the multilingual city Not every language is equal <i>Orhan Agirdag</i>	67
9. City kids and citizenship <i>Lia Karsten</i>	75
10. Those who feel left behind <i>Fenne M. Pinkster</i>	83
11. Exiles in the city: A triptych <i>Guido Snel, Sepp Eckenhaussen and Fien de Ruiter</i>	89

Part 2 Urban nodes

12. Hub Cities 2.0 for the 21st century <i>Núria Arbonés Aran</i>	105
13. Competing cities and urban networks in medieval Europa <i>Arie van Steensel</i>	111
14. Beyond anti-urban sentiments Towards a new metropolitan European family <i>ZefHemel</i>	117
15. Trendy coffee shops and urban sociability <i>Jan Rath and Wietze Gelmers</i>	123
16. A quiet transfer The disappearing urban prison, Amsterdam and beyond <i>G. Geltner</i>	131

17. Build something different for a change! 139
How the people of Amsterdam resisted the sell-out of
their city centre
Tim Verlaan
18. Big is beautiful? 147
Small-scale urban projects for a new century
Stan Majoor
19. Creative cities and shrinking cities: False opposites? 153
Marco Bontje

Part 3 Creative cities

20. The creative destruction and recovery of cities 163
Joost Jonker
21. Visions and symbols of the creative city 171
From the patroness of the city to the 3D Print Canal
House
Claartje Rasterhoff
22. Smart cities value their smart citizens 181
Frank Kresin
23. The dangers of a tamed city 187
Robert C. Kloosterman
24. Cities and creative unpredictability 193
Moritz Föllmer
25. Cultural Incubators: The squats of the 21st century? 199
Jaap Draaisma

26. New cities as testing grounds for a new urbanity	209
<i>Arnold Reijndorp</i>	

Part 4 Sustainable cities

27. The social sustainability of European cities	219
The importance of local government	
<i>Sako Musterd and Jan Nijman</i>	

28. Bothersome and besotted	227
The struggle against public drunkenness in urban space	
<i>Gemma Blok</i>	

29. ProefGroen (Taste Green / Test Green)	235
A healthy diet can also be tasty and sustainable	
<i>Coosje Dijkstra, Jutka Halberstadt, Jaap Seidell and Arnoud Verhoeff</i>	

30. Cycling is an acquired skill	243
A cycling city is created through trial and error	
<i>Marco te Brömmelstroet</i>	

31. Growing socio-spatial segregation in European capitals: Different government, less mitigation	251
<i>Sako Musterd</i>	

32. The future of the city	259
Amsterdam between growth and overexploitation?	
<i>Jeroen Slot and Laure Michon</i>	

33. Welcome to Amsterdam! Well, not really	267
The right to the city requires a city in balance	
<i>Arie van Wijngaarden</i>	

34. More than just housing 275
The importance of housing associations for a sustainable city
Jeroen van der Veer and Dick Schuiling

35. The energetic city: Between dreams and deeds 283
Matthijs Hisschemöller

Part 5 Urban representation

36. The dreamed European city (urbo kune) 293
Eberhard van der Laan

37. Interlocking identities 301
Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Europe in the built environment of the capital
Michael Wintle

38. An eye for freedom: Spinoza and Terstall in Amsterdam 309
Patricia Pisters

39. An urban geopolitics 317
(or, the perils of using the city to rebrand the state – and Europe)
Luiza Bialasiewicz

40. Decor and decorum in diplomacy 323
Herman van der Wusten

41. Urban diplomacy in Europe 331
Mutual engagement or business-minded pragmatism?
Claske Vos

42. Town twinning 339
Over the (ir)relevance of the paradiplomacy of European cities
Virginie Mamadouh

Part 6 Cities in administrative and policy networks

43. The city as a tool to promote European integration: Napoleonic Amsterdam 349
Martijn van der Burg and Anne van Wageningen
44. The European city as a bulwark of resistance against neoliberalisation 355
P.W. Zuidhof
45. About bed, bath and bread 363
Municipalities as the last resort for rejected asylum seekers
Lia Versteegh
46. Safe cities in Europe: Making the leap to sustainable connections 369
Monica den Boer
47. URBAN Bijlmermeer 377
How a European programme became the catalyst for a 'black revolution' in Amsterdam Southeast
Thea Dukes
48. A Europe of peripheries 385
Federico Savini

49. An Urban Agenda for the European Union: *About*
cities or *with* cities? 393
Wouter van der Heijde
50. 2031: The year the city disbanded the state 399
Anne van Wageningen

42. Town twinning

Over the (ir)relevance of the paradiplomacy of European cities

Virginie Mamadouh

Town twinning has a boring image. People tend to be rather derisive about it: 'gesture politics', 'junkets to distant locations for mayors and municipal officials keen to travel. In other words: irrelevant, ineffective and corny. It therefore came as quite a surprise when, early in 2015, Amsterdam's plans to twin with Tel Aviv and Ramallah caused a real stir. Clearly the concept had some relevance after all.

Amsterdam, Tel Aviv and Ramallah: a ménage à trois?

After the local elections in March 2014, the Amsterdam city council decided to review the city's international policy, resulting in the ratification of the 'Amsterdam International Responsible Capital City 2014-2018' policy document. In addition, at the instigation of the liberal party Democrats 66 in the city council, plans were made to explore the possibility of a partnership with the Israeli city of Tel Aviv. However, the idea had to be put on hold in the summer of 2014 due to the hostilities in Gaza. In January 2015, talks resumed, but at the request of left-wing party GroenLinks, the Municipal Executive wished to explore the possibility of a partnership with a Palestinian city as well. The choice fell on Ramallah, the de facto capital of the Palestinian National Authority.

The relationship between these cities, and the states of which they form part – or, more precisely, the question of whether twinning with these cities would legitimise them and their politics or could in fact be a way to promote alternatives – was the central

issue in the political and societal debate that ensued about Amsterdam's town twinning plans. In the motion presented to the City Council, the Municipal Executive emphasised the benefits for the cities involved. They could learn from each other about tolerance and dialogue (the Arab and Jewish communities in Tel Aviv, and the Muslim and Christian communities in Ramallah serving as examples for Amsterdam), city marketing and branding (with Amsterdam being the one to serve as an example for the other two), economic growth (Amsterdam has much to learn from Tel Aviv – which is second only to Silicon Valley as the start-up capital of the world – and could invest in Ramallah's potential, with its highly educated population) and urban planning (Ramallah needed Amsterdam's expertise). They did not go into explicit detail about what Ramallah and Tel Aviv could gain from each other. They did, however, highlight the positive attitudes of the representatives of the three countries involved.

In the discussion that took place in Amsterdam, the advocates of the twinning emphasised the potential for exchange and fostering mutual understanding, while the sceptics argued that it would lead to the 'importation' of conflicts, which was liable to polarise people in Amsterdam. And, they asked, what would we do if Israel were to intensify its policy of occupation, or if Ramallah were to elect a Hamas mayor? Some were against a twinning agreement altogether, as it could be interpreted as a legitimisation of Israel's policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the Palestinian Territories (the Gaza Strip and the West Bank).

For the proponents of twinning with Tel Aviv, there was a kind of selective outrage. They felt there was a double standard at work. Criticism of Israel was considered a reason not to twin with Tel Aviv, but no one seemed to be critical of the political stances of the other countries in which the city had twin towns (China, Turkey, Morocco...). Many Jewish locals felt personally offended. Ronny Naftaniel (who was until recently the president of the Centre for Information and Documentation on Israel, CIDI) was in charge of the campaign in favour of the twinning. Criticism

of a possible twinning was equated with an out-and-out attack on Israel's right to exist. But opponents feared that entering into a twinning agreement with an Israeli city would antagonise Amsterdam's Muslim population.

However, the *ménage à trois* idea – intended as a compromise to address the sensitivities of Dutch supporters of both the Israeli and the Palestine causes – was considered unacceptable in Ramallah. A partnership with an Israeli city was out of the question for the Palestinian movement, which was calling for a boycott of all official Israeli institutions. The City of Ramallah stated that it was abiding by the Olive Declaration of December 2014. Drawn up in Seville during the United Nations-sponsored International Conference of Governments and Civil Society Organizations in Support of Palestinian Rights, this declaration calls on local governments to 'not contract (...) with parties and not twin (...) with cities that support or benefit from occupation or violate related prohibitions under international law'. For this reason, while twinning with Amsterdam was welcome, twinning with Tel Aviv was unacceptable. Where Amsterdam celebrated Tel Aviv as the 'Amsterdam of Israel' (international and cosmopolitan, ethnically diverse, gay-friendly and tolerant, creative and politically more inclined towards the parties that are critical of Netanyahu's policies), the Palestinians underlined the city's provenance (built at the expense of destroyed and ethnically-cleansed Palestinian villages and the city of Jaffa) and its central position in 'Israel's regime of oppression, colonisation and apartheid'. In this context, Israeli start-ups – which are often associated with military technology and applications – are not considered examples to be emulated.

The Mayor of Amsterdam was very much in favour of the double twinning, but only D66 and CDA representatives in the city council were on board with the idea. VVD supported a twinning with Tel Aviv, but not with Ramallah. The left-wing parties (GroenLinks, PvdA, SP and Partij voor de Dieren) wanted to hold off altogether for the time being. On 1 July, the Amsterdam city council made the decision to refrain from entering into a

twinning agreement and, instead, to further research alternative possibilities for cooperation. A visit by the Mayor to both cities was scheduled for the autumn to this end. 'We can date Tel Aviv instead, we don't have to get married,' said Marjolein Moorman, the leader of Amsterdam's PvdA party, in an interview with the *NRC Handelsblad* daily newspaper.

Town twinning and urban diplomacy: A long history

Relationships between cities come in many different forms. In the modern system of nation states that took shape in Europe following the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the nation state increasingly became the container for a political, social, economic and cultural community which was, increasingly, clearly separated from the rest of the world by rigid national boundaries. The nation state began to monopolise the relationships with those abroad, and controlled cross-border movements more and more tightly. Cities increasingly came under the authority of the state; local governments increasingly became the enactors of central-government policy and had less and less autonomy to develop their own policies.

However, cities never ceased to maintain their external ties. At the beginning of the 20th century, when the major social and political movements were looking for solutions for problems caused by industrialisation and urbanisation, emancipation and combating poverty, local administrators met to exchange ideas and experience relating to hygiene, housing and public health, city administration, public utilities and spatial planning (think of the garden cities, for example). There was an international network of local authorities which, following the 1913 Ghent World Fair, formally established itself as the *Union Internationale des Villes*: 'Local authorities of all nations unite!' Though it was predominantly a European movement, in the 1920s it was supported by the major American philanthropic foundations (Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller). However, attempts

to obtain official recognition from the League of Nations (the precursor of the United Nations) fell flat because it was reluctant to give legitimacy to local authorities, as this would damage the sovereignty of the nation states which, of course, constituted the membership of the League of Nations.

After the Second World War, bilateral twinning agreements really began to take off. Through twinning arrangements, local politicians hoped to make a contribution to a lasting peace. National governments often encouraged twinning arrangements to foster understanding between citizens in different countries. In the US, President Eisenhower promoted citizen diplomacy and the establishment of 'sister cities'. In Western Europe, the French-German partnership between De Gaulle and Adenauer promoted town twinning between French and West-German cities. British and Dutch cities were also very involved with the initiative. Following the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, pan-European town twinning was stimulated by the powers that be as a tool for a peaceful transition and as a symbol of European reunification. This 'message of peace' is the reason that the European Communities, and later the European Union, have always encouraged twinning links.

Through the second half of the 20th century, twinning agreements and similar partnerships became increasingly frequent and diverse. In the 1980s, local development cooperation between local authorities on opposite sides of the equator became increasingly popular. The same happened later with the exchange of skills and expertise as part of 'Local Agenda 21', the contributions of local governments to the United Nations' Agenda 21 action plan for sustainable development. The fight against the apartheid regime also featured the establishment of twinning links, in the case of Amsterdam with the port city of Beira in Mozambique, which had lost a lot of traffic following the worldwide boycott of South Africa. The twinning links with cities in Nicaragua (Amsterdam–Managua) had a similar political objective. In this case, it was about expressing support

for the Sandinistas, at a time when the US – the Dutch government's primary military partner – was supporting the Contras. In the past fifteen years, new objectives have become important. Cultural partnerships – aimed at the countries of origin of large migrant groups – began to come into fashion. But economic partnerships became even more important, with the emphasis being on shared economic interests, import-export, exchange of knowledge, investments, etc.

The economic benefits of town twinning are extensively debated. Other objectives – such as the exchange of knowledge and expertise – are also difficult to evaluate, and this is even more true for its potential impact on peace. Nevertheless, time and again participants have found that twinning links bring people closer together. The people involved in this type of exchange get a special glimpse into the daily life of someone from a different cultural background, and that often ends up being a formative experience. The personal friendships that come about in this process can permanently alter people's perceptions of the political developments in each other's countries. However, this is mainly the case in smaller towns, whose inhabitants are less likely to come into contact with people from a wide range of other cultures by other means. In a city like Amsterdam, town twinnings barely register on people's radar, because the likelihood of becoming directly involved is very small and they have a lot of other opportunities to meet people from other countries and become acquainted with their cultures. But even in these cases, long-term twinning links bring specific benefits through their sustained engagement with specific places elsewhere.

Pertinent and alternative?

The paradiplomacy of cities often dovetails seamlessly with the foreign policy of the country of which they are a part; only very rarely will there be discrepancies, such as when American cities became involved in climate policy after the US government

decided to retreat from the Kyoto protocol – or when Dutch local authorities declared themselves nuclear-free while the Dutch government was allowing American nuclear weapons to be stored on Dutch territory. Or nowadays, when European local authorities are declaring themselves TTIP-free zones in protest against the transatlantic trade deal that the EU and the US are negotiating. Mayors are presenting themselves as rescuers when states are failing, because they are both too small and too big for policy to be effective and too far removed from their citizens: see the Global Parliament of Mayors inspired by the American political theorist Benjamin Barber. Often, urban paradiplomacy is presented as an alternative to conventional inter-state relations: closer to the day-to-day life of citizens, more informal, more practical and therefore a source of hope when inter-state relations are at a seeming impasse, such as between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority.

In other words, if the gap between citizens on both sides of the barrier/wall that bisects Israel and the West Bank gets wider and wider, any opportunity for interaction – whether this be through town twinning or otherwise – is like oxygen: a promise for different ways of engaging with each other, and a reminder that our interaction with those abroad need not be monopolised by the nation states. There is a wide range of other mental blockages that call for the establishment of new twinning links: the polarisation between north and south within the eurozone (financial crisis) and between old and new Member States (internal migration), or the imbalance of power between the European Union and its neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe and in the southern Mediterranean (refugee crisis). Even in an era in which satellite television, the internet and social media are freeing individuals from a state monopoly on international relations, the tried-and-tested model of town twinning is not a bad way to bring schoolchildren, athletes and dance companies closer together, and to liberate citizens from the stereotypes and half-truths they may hold about each other.

The author

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Further reading

Barber, Benjamin. 2013. *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*. New Haven. CT. Yale University Press.

Mamadouh, Virginie & Herman van der Wusten. 2016. 'The para-diplomacy of cities and regions: Transnational relations between sub-state political entities', in: Jason Dittmer & Fiona McConnell (Eds.), *Diplomatic Cultures and International Politics: Translations, Spaces and Alternatives*. London: Routledge. 135-153.