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From the Global City to the Global City Making. The European and (Latin) American Capitals of Culture
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In a context of reinforced interurban competition, merit-based tools – labels, prizes, honors – have become instruments for promoting urban innovation and disseminating *good practices*. Initiated by the European Capital of Culture (1985), the global spread of cultural capital models aligns with neoliberal urban policies, merging political, cultural, and economic logics. A decolonial approach to policy mobilities should pay particular attention to the locus in which ideas are produced, recognizing asymmetries and historical socio-economic conditionings. This is particularly relevant to the (Latin) American Capital of Culture (2000). I argue that the "capital of culture" phenomenon is a political instrument inscribed within the macro-paradigm of neo-modernization ideology, which serves the city models based on the hegemonic urban imaginaries of creative, innovative, and smart cities. I focus on competing cultural definitions and conflicting urban imaginaries.

Keywords: Capitals of culture, Urban imaginaries, Creativity, City making, European Union

About cultural capitals, policy mobilities, and urban imaginaries

In the last two decades, we have witnessed a shift in the paradigm and understanding of cultural capitals. Traditionally, there were large urban spaces of structuring power in a certain field of symbolic production or in most of them, as shown by comparative studies on cultural history, and the history of art, music, literature, and theatre, in cities like Paris, Vienna, New York, Rome, London. Additionally, we must not overlook transatlantic urban spaces in a peripheral or semi-peripheral position in the world system structure, yet traditionally receptive and creative,

according to the ontological developmentalism of the *America Mestiza*: Buenos Aires, Ciudad México, Caracas, Quito, La Habana. The transition is from this traditional conception of cultural capitals to the current "capitals of culture", which are often medium-sized, second tier, and less well-known cities overshadowed by the metropoles: Mons (European Capital of Culture [ECC], 2015), Guimarães (ECC, 2012), Matera (ECC, 2019), Mérida (American Capital of Culture [ACC], 2000, 2017), Mayagüez (ACC, 2015), and Valdivia (ACC, 2016).

This significant shift – from well-established symbolic showcases of national power, traditionally defined by their economic and political centrality, dense networks of cultural institutions, leisure and consumption practices, and iconic monuments and architecture – toward more decentralized, emergent, and itinerant expressions of global cultural power, can be interpreted as part of economic globalization's challenge to the dominance of capital or primary cities.

The globalized economy not only configurated its own dominant metropolitan centres, critical to the economic functioning of a network society: the global cities[1]. But also, and most importantly, established inter-urban competition, advantageous positioning in global networks, international reputation, and adaptation to the needs and demands of global capital as guiding elements of a good urban policy.

The resilient, sustainable, creative, innovative, and smart dimensions will soon be incorporated into the good policy *vademecum*. This paradoxical dynamic of differentiation and standardization, framed by global urbanism regimes, seemingly operates in the most "democratic" way: within reach of all cities: large, medium, and small-sized, well-known and unknown, world heritage sites or ancient industrial hubs, of local, regional, national, or transnational significance, from the "developed" and "developing" worlds.

The European discourse about the Capital of Culture initiative is framed within a broader context of strategic realignment and a paradigmatic shift within the EU, in which cultural issues are increasingly integrated into a growth- and competitiveness-oriented agenda. Capitals of Culture thus operate at the intersection of cultural and urban policy, shifting socio-economic dynamics, and the evolving role of cities within the European integration process.

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[1]   M. Castells, *The Rise of Network Society,* Blackwell, Oxford 1995. S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001. A.J. Scott (ed.) *Global city-regions: trends, theory, policy,* OUP, Oxford 2001.

Based on a systematic analysis of official documentation related to calls for applications, resolutions, reports, evaluation documents, programming, candidacies, and communication strategies of the cities in Europe and Latin America during the period 2000-20, this study aims to explore the symbolic dimension of the process. Our aim is to examine the re-signification of cultural capitals, through a dominant – though not exclusive – analytical lens that highlights the shifts in meaning and the multidimensionality of the 'capital' concept: from cultural capital as an instrument of Europeanization to capitalization as a device of cultural and urban governance (city making).

From the Lisbon Strategy to the creative turn

The "European City of Culture" initiative was established in 1985 as an intergovernmental action promoted by the European Ministers of Culture. Its aim was to make certain cultural aspects of the designated city, region, or country accessible to the broader European public, and to turn the selected city into a stage for a series of cultural contributions from other Member States. The initiative was intended to express a culture defined both by its shared elements and by the richness that stems from its diversity[2].

The operational principles of the program initially stipulated that each year a Member State would designate one city to host the event, with the order of nomination following an alphabetical rotation. Athens was the first "European City of Culture" in 1985, followed by culturally renowned cities such as Florence (1986), Amsterdam (1987), West Berlin (1988), and Paris (1989).

The development of the program has been shaped by a series of modifications and legislative advancements. The conclusions adopted at the meeting of the Ministers of Culture within the Council[3] on May 18, 1990, introduced new eligibility criteria for nominated cities. From 1996 onward, the initiative was also opened to other European states that, while not members of the European Community, adhered to the principles of democracy, and

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[2]   Council of Ministers for Cultural Affairs of the European Community, *Resolution concerning the annual event European City of Culture,* Official Journal of the European Communities, C 153 (22 June 1985), p. 2, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ. do?uri=CELEX:41985X0622:EN:HTML; accessed September 2021.

[3]   Council of the European Union, *Conclusions of the Ministers of Culture meeting within the Council of 18 May 1990 on future eligibility for the "European City of Culture" and on a special European Cultural Month event*, Official Journal C 162, 3 July 1990, p. 1. https:// eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A41990X0703; accessed July 2022.

pluralism. Additionally, this resolution established the European Cultural Month as a complementary special initiative.

The Maastricht Treaty[4] institutionalized cultural intervention at the Community level by providing it with a legal framework. Article 128 states that «the Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time highlighting the common cultural heritage». In line with this approach, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union established, in 1999, the "European Capital of Culture" initiative as a community action for the period spanning 2005 to 2019.

The Decision 1419/1999/EC[5] explicitly recognizes the fundamental role of urban phenomena in the formation and dissemination of European cultures, as well as the media impact, symbolic importance, and positive effects of the program on the cultural and tourist development of cities. This Decision of the European Parliament and the Council not only establishes new criteria and selection mechanisms, a chronological order of nomination for the member states, and a European Committee of Independent Experts to evaluate the applications, among other procedures. By establishing a community action in support of the "European Capital of Culture" initiative, it sanctions a shift in the attribution of meaning that has already been observed in empirical reality.

The term "cultural capital" gradually emerges through local and transnational processes of appropriation and reinterpretation. In this context, the actions of the cities involved, along with their specific urban marketing strategies, illustrate the reciprocal transfer of experiences and practices between local actors and the EU, framed within a multi-level governance perspective. Therefore, cities do not merely serve as passive recipients in the implementation of European programs and policies; instead, they act as active agents, shaping and driving the practical realization of community provisions and guidelines.

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[4] Council of the European Communities, *Treaty on European Union, signed at Maastricht on 7 February 1992*, Official Journal of the European Communities, English edition, C 191, Vol. 35, 29 July 1992, p. 1 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C:1992:191:TOC; accessed September 2021.

[5] European Parliament and Council**,** *Decision 1419/1999/EC of 25 May 1999 establishing a Community action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2005 to 2019*, Official Journal of the European Communities, L 166, 29 June 1999, pp. 27-31 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/1999/1419/oj/eng; accessed September 2021.

In March 2000, the Lisbon European Council[6] set forth a new strategic objective for the Union to tackle the numerous challenges posed by the radical transformation of the economy and the emerging imperatives within the context of globalization. The EU aimed to become, over the next decade, the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy, capable of sustainable growth, creating more and better jobs, and fostering greater social cohesion.

The creative turn, or the emergence of a creativity framework in European policy – a paradigm that intertwines creativity, culture, innovation, and economic growth as teleological forces – has been directly linked to the Lisbon Strategy, with these processes being described as correlated and interdependent[7].

The *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World*[8] confirms this structural transformation. By recognizing that the cultural industries and the creative sector significantly contribute to Europe's GDP, it establishes the promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity, a pillar of social and technological innovation, a driver of economic growth, competitiveness, and employment, as well as a crucial element in the EU's international relations. Consequently, a fundamental shift is observed: from a community rhetoric that positioned culture as a meaningful framework for European self-understanding and identity – emphasizing the Union's linguistic, historical, and territorial diversity – to new understandings and connotations of culture, now linked to creativity as an ideological impetus and mobilizing slogan in a competitive global context.

The European Capitals of Culture adopt as their functional and discursive core the successive frameworks on culture and cultural action promoted by the EU, facilitating the cultural framing of objectives that are

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[6]   European Council, *Lisbon Special European Council (March 2000): Towards a Europe of Innovation and Knowledge*, European Council Conclusions, Lisbon, 23-24 March 2000. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm; accessed October 2025.

[7]   A. Littoz-Monnet, *Encapsulating EU Cultural Policy into the EU's Growth and Competiveness Agenda: Explaining the Success of a Paradigmatic Shift in Brussels*, in E. Psychogiopoulou (eds.), *Cultural Governance and the European Union: Protecting and Promoting Cultural Diversity in Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2015, pp. 25-36. P. Schlesinger, *The creative economy: Invention of a global orthodoxy*, in "Les Enjeux de l'information et de la communication", XVII, 2016, 2, pp.187-205.

[8]   European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World* (COM (2007) 242 final), Brussels, 10 May 2007, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0242; accessed July 2022.

essentially economic, social, and urban development oriented. The very launch of the initiative and its subsequent transformation into a community action are cultural political acts that reflect shifts in the development trajectories and ideological objectives of the EU[9].

In the preceding decade, a strong discourse emerged around cities as strategic nodes within the European integration process. Consequently, it became crucial to advance public policies on urbanity and urban development, formally acknowledged in the communication *Towards an Urban Agenda in the European Union*[10]. This document explores the imbalances within the European urban system and the shift from industrial sectors to services in the context of the new economy. It advocates for improved urban planning and greater effectiveness in community interventions within urban areas to better address global challenges. However, it refrains from proposing the creation of new authorities or structures at the European level for managing urban affairs.

The above highlights a series of central, yet unresolved, issues in the discussion on the design of policies that focus on urban management. The Commission, lacking formal responsibility in urban planning and development – which resides with the member states – seems to oscillate between affirming and denying a clear mandate. This fluctuation stems from the balance of power between those who wish to promote the urban agenda and those who remain concerned about the expansion of the European Commission's areas of competence. Hence, the implicit nature of the urban dimension in European policy[11], which is reflected in the cross-cutting nature of urban-related issues within policies concerning the environment, cohesion, transport, research and innovation, social and cultural affairs, as well as regional policy intervention, without yet constituting an explicit urban policy framework.

The recent developments of the European Capitals of Culture (ECC) are positioned at the intersection of culture and its connotations within

[9]   T. Lähdesmäki, *Identity Politics in the European Capital of Culture Initiative*, dissertation, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu 2014, retrieved from: https://erepo.uef.fi/items/e0d7f7bd-14d7-42c0-83da-95975032008d; accessed October 2025.

[10]   European Commission, *Communication from the Commission: Towards an Urban Agenda in the European Union*, Brussels, 6 May 1997, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:51997DC0197; accessed March 2023.

[11]   M. Parkinson, *Urban Policy in Europe. Where have we been and where are we going?*, document prepared under NODE Project on European Metropolitan Governance for Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science & Culture, 2005. M. González, *La europeización urbana a través de la Política de cohesión*, in "Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals", CIV, 2013, pp. 133-154.

the framework of creativity and the urban dimension implicit in European policy. The focal point of the initiative shifts – not in terms of exclusivity but rather in terms of relevance – from Europeanization to the creation of economically competitive urban spaces, from an emphasis on issues of identity to urban regeneration processes. While the initiative does not overlook social aspects and citizen participation – often with limited success – the core of the proposal lies in the city's ability to leverage the designation to trigger a series of material and symbolic transformations that bring it as close as possible to an evolving definition of a cultural, innovative, smart, and creative city. This definition serves as the empirical benchmark for the dominant urban imaginaries on a global scale.

Non-European cultural capitals: the global spread of a model?

Primarily enhanced by the ECC program, the current emergence of a global model of cultural capitals is inscribed within neoliberal urban policy, comprising new forms of interaction between the political, cultural, and economic spheres. In 1989, David Harvey[12] accounted for this reorientation of urban governance from the managerial approach of the 1960s – with a strong presence of the state and national redistribution policies – toward a spirit of enterprise. City governments were intended to uncover, foster, and exploit new territorial resources, and symbolic and material assets to enhance their competitiveness and capacity to attract economic flows, aiming to improve citizens' quality of life.

In a context of reinforced interurban competition, the meritocratic instruments – labels, prizes, titles, honours – from the pioneering culture and heritage domains to sustainability, and creativity have become suitable tools of public administration for promoting urban innovation and disseminating exemplary experiences: "good practices". Involvement in these competitions allows the circulation of cultural policies and urban design that can be transferred to other contexts, reinforcing the idea of greater power granted to cities and a detachment from top-down nation-states policies. This growing profusion of labels/rewards no longer aims to distinguish the territory itself but to recognize its governance's quality[13].

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[12] D. Harvey, *From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism*, in "Geografiska Annaler", Series B, Human Geography, LXXI, 1989, pp. 3-17.

[13] R. Epstein, *Les trophees de la gouvernance urbaine*, in "Pouvoirs Locaux", XCVII, 2013, pp. 13-8.

A summary taxonomy of the "capitals of culture" initiatives begins with the European Capital of Culture (ECC), created in 1985, followed by the generation of the first vague of international programs in the 1990s: Iberoamerican Capital of Culture (1991), Arab Capital of Culture (1996) and American Capital of Culture (1998). With different promoting and dispensing authorities these labels´ ideological proposition is not limited to competition or international promotion but functioning as leading forces to drive local policy actors from the global "South" and "North" to get in touch. Elected representatives, experts, and consultants could exchange ideas and foster connections; in a general framework of transnational municipalism aiming, among others strategic goals, to promote development and democracy in the "third world".

Progressing with this motley view of cultural distinctions awarded to cities, we witnessed in the 2000s a regional, national and international boom of the "capital of culture" labels. Some were ephemeral, lucrative, and unsuccessful, while others continue to take place to this day, triggering economic, cultural, and urban regeneration processes of dissimilar significance [Figure 1].

	European Capital of Culture	Ibero-American Capital of Cultures	Capital of Arab Culture	Cultural Capitals of the Islamic World	Cultural City of Southeast Asia	Cultural City of East Asia	African Capital of Culture
First Capital Year	1985	1991	1996	2004	2005	2014	2022
Frequency	Annual	Annual	Annual	Annual	Biennial	Annual	Biennial
Simultaneity or Regular Sharing of the Title	Yes (2 European Capitals + 1 city from candidate countries for accession every three years)	No	No	Yes (one capital per region: Arab, Asian, African) + host city of the ministerial meeting (biennially)	No	3 cities (China, Japan, South Korea, one per country)	No
Bidding	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No (each country designates a city)	Yes
Governing Body	European Union	UCCI (Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities)	ALECSO (Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization)	ICESCO (Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)	ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)	Trilateral/ National Cooperation Secretariat	CG-LU-África

Fig. 1. Transnational Capitals of Culture Programmes. Author's own elaboration.

The international "capital of culture" phenomenon has the potential to inform about two important subjects sometimes neglected in urban reflections: small and medium-sized cities, and non-Western cities. While media and political agendas focus on the metropoles and their attractivity, European Capital of Culture and American Capital of Culture programs seem to be attentive – in their most recent stages – to second tier, less well-known, and medium-sized cities, even if this definition remains vague and constantly debated. The "capitals of culture" spread in Latin America, Asia, and most recently Africa accounts for the ability of the contemporary regimes of global urban governance, just as the previous regimes of developmentalism, to influence and even orientate cultural policy practices, within the confines of the hegemonic discourses of city´s smartness, creativity, and innovation.

Exploring the intricate ways in which the "capital of culture" label – rooted in European experience – is implemented and adapted in the Global South, utilized by elected representatives to bolster legitimacy, and embraced or contested by local policy actors, could challenge Western-centric perspectives. It has the potential to foster new epistemologies and embrace plural narratives that acknowledge diverse trajectories and urban realities.

The (Latin) American Capitals of Culture

The American Capital of Culture (ACC) is a cultural capital initiative established and managed by a non-governmental organization of the same name, based in Barcelona. Since 2000, Latin American cities have participated in the program without interruption. However, the persistent lack of transparency in selection criteria and procedures – along with repeated public challenges and controversies surrounding the managing body – stands in sharp contrast to the title's continued existence.

The imposition of a registration fee on cities and territories seeking to apply for the title of ACC has been among the most contested and controversial aspects of the initiative since its inception. In addition, the composition of the selection committee – as well as the list of candidate cities each year – has remained strictly confidential, raising legitimate concerns regarding the transparency and credibility of the candidacy and selection process.

Despite these issues, cities across the Latin American geocultural space continue to engage with the initiative. This persistent participation invites reflection on the urban experiences shaped by the title, its political, social,

and cultural instrumentalization, and its entanglement with heterogeneous governance strategies and local development agendas.

An analysis from the perspective of the participating cities highlights the specific uses and localized meanings attributed to the title. The ACC designation – administered by an organization external to the region and characterized by the aforementioned irregularities – generates dynamics of variable geometry within Latin American cities, contingent upon political interests and the broader local and national contexts into which the designation is embedded.

The ACC is not typically accompanied by large-scale infrastructure developments directly linked to the event itself. Instead, it tends to align with and reinforce the continuity of pre-existing cultural policies within the host city. Moreover, the title is often situated within a broader framework of urban transformation, encompassing regeneration initiatives, infrastructure revitalization, and the restructuring of administrative governance. In terms of short, medium, and long-term legacy, many of the projects initiated during the designation period risk being dismantled or left incomplete due to shifts in the national political landscape or a corresponding decline in state involvement.

If we consider the cases of the Latin American cities of Valdivia and Quito – designated as American Capital of Culture in 2016 and 2011, respectively – we observe two distinct modalities in the appropriation of the title: one grounded in a process-oriented logic, the other aligned with a major event framework. Both, however, are embedded within broader dynamics of international visibility and symbolic projection.

In Valdivia, the designation was marked by large-scale public events and the participation of renowned artists and emblematic cultural groups. In contrast, in Quito, the title operated as a strategic framework and catalyst for structural transformations, notably within the political context of the Citizen Revolution, and was aligned with efforts toward cultural democratization.

In both cases, the ACC served as a vehicle for the pursuit of public legitimacy and political instrumentalization, leveraging external and international recognition – specifically from Barcelona – as a means of reinforcing the credibility and visibility of local government initiatives.

Creativity as an instituting category: global city making

In recent decades, creativity has transitioned from a residual category to a central focus of contemporary research and discourse in the social sciences.

This axiological transformation signifies that the construct of creativity has become omnipresent, assuming a core and structuring function that permeates all dimensions and areas of social life: from the economy, class, and education to industries and creative cities.

We hypothesize that the normativization of creativity is not confined to the aesthetic dimension, and the profusion of creative adjectives extends beyond the semantic domain. The institution of creativity as a dominant cultural signification impacts all domains of social life, functioning not merely as the aestheticization of established realities but as an instituting device of socio-imaginary configurations that, once instrumentalized, induce certain processes of change. Creativity has been considered by various authors as a characteristic trait of neoliberalism. It represents a contradictory creativity inherent to neoliberal policies and the need for corrective actions in their application and development[14]. The creative nature of these strategies refers to their ability to resolve systematic contradictions that arise from their implementation in diverse contexts, specifically their capacity to react to emerging frictions, challenges, and problems at the local level[15].

In this sense, our argument is that neoliberal creativity refers not only to its chameleon-like ability to adapt to various contexts and local conditions but also to the fact that it has positioned creativity itself as a dense core of neoliberal capitalism. Creativity, as a structuring and normative element of society, operates in a dual dimension: aesthetic, which relates to cultural production and consumption, and techno scientific. The effective intertwining of these two domains is realized in the idea of innovation.

Since the publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* by Richard Florida[16] in 2002, discourses on creativity have gained significant amplification and attracted considerable academic and public interest, though not without criticism and controversy. These discourses have increasingly focused on the modelling of preferential spaces and the description of the practices and lifestyles of a specific category of actors: the creative class.

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[14] S. Ravazzi*, Explaining the contradictory creativity of neoliberalism: Evidence from the economic development agendas of four European second-tier cities*, in "Journal of Urban Affairs", XLIII, 2021, 10, pp. 1492-512.

[15] J. Peck, *Explaining (with) neoliberalism*, in "Territory, Politics, Governance", 1, 2013, 2, pp. 132-57. J. Peck et al., *Neoliberal urbanism: Models, moments, mutations*, in "SAIS Review of International Affairs", XXIX, 2009, 1, pp. 49-66.

[16] R. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, New York 2002-10.

According to Florida's arguments, there is a causal relationship between the presence of the creative class in cities and the increase in corporate investment from mobile, high-tech companies, which ultimately translates into economic growth. The concept of creative cities, in this framework, responds to the need to model urban spaces – both social and built environments – that align with the interests, motivations, and expectations of creative professionals. In the era of creativity, the notions of the creative economy and creative industries are also closely associated with creative cities.

In 2004, UNESCO launched its Creative Cities Program, an institutional effort to propel the phenomenon of urban creativity to a global scale. This program is a cooperation network among cities that embrace creativity and cultural industries as a strategic factor for local development. Currently, 350 cities are part of this network, with more than fifty from Latin America and the Caribbean, inscribed in domains such as design, gastronomy, multimedia arts, cinema, music, and crafts and folk art. The latest evaluation report of the initiative, presented in February 2024[17], acknowledges the existence of a geographical imbalance in connections, skewed towards the northern hemisphere, and a tendency among participating cities to prioritize economic objectives over social or environmental ones.

The emergence of the creativity framework in Europe following the Lisbon Strategy (2000) marks a paradigmatic shift in the objectives of community intervention within the cultural sphere. Economic considerations have become central to the European Union's cultural policy. The European Agenda for Culture (2007) frames culture as a direct wellspring of creativity, which in turn serves as a pivotal catalyst for economic growth, competitiveness, and employment generation. In December 2013, the European Parliament and the Council adopted the flagship program "Creative Europe."

Although creative cities and cultural capitals represent distinct urban strategies, there is an increasing overlap and intersection between the two models. Creativity has emerged as a central hegemonic value, and experiences of cultural capital increasingly emphasize the role of creative industries in urban revitalization. This trend is supported by several studies examining the impact of the European Capital of Culture on the growth of these industries. In Latin America, cities like Brasília (2008), Curiti-

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[17] UNESCO, *UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) – Evaluation*, March 2024, IOS/EVS/PI/215 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388996; accessed January 2024.

ba (2003), Santo Domingo (2010), Panama City (2003), Guadalajara (2005), Mérida (2000, 2017), and Ibagué (2022), designated as American Capitals of Culture during these respective years, have integrated their city branding strategies based on the capital of culture label with inscription in the UNESCO Creative Cities network.

In contrast to trivializing the concept of the capital city, as implied by the abundance of new cultural, green and innovative capitals, we contend that it represents a hypertrophy of its political and symbolic dimensions, which are instrumentalized as tacit and implicit governance devices in a context where the proliferation of titles and awards shapes the management of urban agglomerations. These itinerant capitals function as mechanisms that institute new socio-imaginary meanings, not adhering to the historical or conventional sense of the capital city but rather embodying the idea of an efficient and performative urban entity.

The cultural hegemony of this urban notion transcends the traditional dominance of the metropolis over the rest of the territorial construction, expressing itself through global imaginaries of "smart, innovative, creative" cities that dictate the current material and symbolic restructuring of cities – city making – leading to their differential and functional homogenization. This process leads to a paradoxical dynamic where cities strive for distinction yet also conform to standardized models. Hence, it becomes crucial to develop urban strategies that are more inclusive, capable of addressing the growing disparities in distribution, spatial segregation, and economic, social, and cultural inequalities. These disparities are increasingly concentrated in cities in proportion to their creative potential and efforts to enhance their attractiveness in the global urban market.

Final notes

We posit that culture plays a pivotal role in transnational neo-modernization, analogous to the significance urbanization held in national modernization processes. Indeed, culture and cities are fundamental components of our globalized world, both causative and resultant. Culture is conceptualized here as a system of signs, a symbolic framework through which society is portrayed and envisaged, and the mechanism by which this imagination transforms into rationality[18]. Culture not only constitutes the essence of urban affairs, forming the foundation of its symbolic econ-

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[18]   R. Peet, *Culture, imaginary, and rationality in regional economic development*, in *"Environment and Planning"*, XXXII, 2000, pp. 1215-34.

omy, but as a resource, it transcends mere commodity status, it serves as the nucleus of a new epistemic paradigm. It acts as a potent instrument for governing cities and an effective apparatus for fostering senses of belonging and otherness.

We contend that the "capital of culture" phenomenon functions as a political instrument and governance tool situated within the broader framework of neo-modernization ideology. It is oriented towards expanding and accelerating cultural and creative industries, embodying urban models that embrace concepts such as smartness, innovation, and futuristic imaginaries. In this sense, it represents an urban apotheosis of global techno-capitalism. Unlike the European Capitals of Culture, which are more clearly defined, non-European Capitals present a polymorphous object that is difficult to grasp and define. Nevertheless, empirical cases of medium-sized cities adopting a radical strategy of city branding can illustrate some of the converging aspects between these two manifestations.

A postcolonial or rather decolonial approach to policy mobilities should meticulously consider the origins of ideas, acknowledging asymmetries and historical socio-economic conditioning. The certification of a city's cultural quality by international organizations serves as a mark of credibility, with labelling enabling entities like the European Union, UNESCO, and the American Capital of Culture organization to influence local cultural policies without directly intervening in the decision-making processes of urban actors (through application criteria and indicators), challenging the assumed agency of local policymakers in adopting "good ideas" from elsewhere.

The predominant circuits of urban model circulation and policy mobilities, as evidenced by much empirical research focusing on North-North and North-South dynamics[19], underscore the critical role of geopolitical location in validating knowledge and practices. Programs like the European and American Capitals of Culture are ideological constructs imbued with deeply political content, endorsing global urban imaginaries and disseminating representational discourses aligned with narratives of innovative and creative cities.

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[19]   G. Jajamovich, *América Latina y las asimetrías de poder en abordajes sobre producción y circulación de políticas y teorías urbanas*, in "Quid", XVI, 2017, 8, pp. 160-73. M. Lane, *Policy Mobility and Postcolonialism: The Geographical Production of Urban Policy Territories in Lusaka and Sacramento*, in "Annals of the American Association of Geographers", CXII, 2022, 15, pp. 1350-68.