The potential of political-geographical interpretations of massive air transport developments in Gulf cities

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Declaring that air transport has been ‘booming business’ in the Gulf would be somewhat of an understatement. The most striking example, of course, is Dubai. As of October 2012, Dubai International Airport is the 10th busiest airport in the world by passenger traffic, and the 6th busiest airport in the world by cargo traffic (<http://www.aci.aero>, accessed October 18th, 2012). Meanwhile, Dubai’s flag carrier Emirates now operates more than 2500 flights per week to 122 cities in 74 countries across 6 continents (www.emirates.com, accessed October 18th, 2012). Two further developments make these figures even more striking.

First, although Dubai is the most conspicuous example, the real story is that this approach is being replicated across the Gulf region. In practice, this always involves government strategies of vigorous investments in airport infrastructure as well as the development of a significant ‘flag carrier’. This carrier thereby adopts a business model aimed at (1) connecting the focus city with key global cities as well as (2) facilitating ‘hub strategies’ (i.e. serving as a switching point for traffic between, say, cities in Australia and Europe). In recent years, the Gulf region has thus seen the reproduction of Dubai’s boosterist approach to air transport expansion. Abu Dhabi with Abu Dhabi International Airport/Etihad Airways and Qatar with Doha International Airport/Qatar Airways, for instance, have become major players in their own right (see Figure 1a).

Second, one of the most compelling features of Gulf cities’ rise in air transport networks is the pace at which these developments unfold. Dubai, for instance, has acquired its present stature in about two decades. But perhaps even more astonishing are the suggestions that this is just the beginning. Dubai International Airport’s present upgrade to accommodate 75 million passengers per year is only temporary, as operations will at some point move to the newly built Al Maktoum International Airport, which has an anticipated capacity of 160 million passengers. And again, Dubai’s continued expansion serves as a benchmark for other cities in the region: Doha and Qatar are equally eyeing further expansion, while Bahrain and Oman are looking into similar developments centered on Manama/Gulf Air and Muscat/Oman Air (see Figure 1b).

Figure 1a-b. Existing and planned airport infrastructure in the Gulf Region (Data source: Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, 2010; inspiration drawn from Bowen & Cidell, 2011; key: AUH = Abu Dhabi International Airport, BAH = Bahrain International Airport, DMM = Sharjah International Airport, DOH = Doha International Airport, DXB = Dubai International Airport, KWI = Kuwait International Airport, SHJ = Sharjah International Airport).

An obvious research question is how the dramatic air transport expansion plans in the Gulf region can be understood and interpreted. However, to date, few geographers have contributed to the understanding of these remarkable changes. As a result, these developments have mainly been explained through the functioning of air transport markets. Two distinct paradigmatic interpretations abound in such analyses.

The first paradigm stresses the 'economic rationality' of these developments. In the case of Dubai/Emirates, this implies – in addition to the wholesale effect of the city's economic growth, which obviously creates additional demand for air transport (e.g. Lohmann et al., 2009) – pointing to the relevance of (1) the city's 'strategic' location and (2) its newish business model. The first point is for instance shown by the fact that no major agglomeration on the globe is further than 8,000 miles away from Dubai (see the Emirates advertisement in Figure 2). As a result, any two major cities on earth can be connected via Dubai with no additional stops (e.g. The Economist, 2010a). A range of bold choices that have worked out well demonstrates the second point: Emirates' focus on underserved cities in established markets (e.g. Hamburg and Birmingham), its decision to tap into new markets (e.g. African cities), and its strategy to offer new options in existing markets (e.g. the 'Falcon Route' between Australia and Europe as an alternative to the established 'Kangaroo Route' via Singapore) have been obvious business

successes (e.g. Grimme, 2011).

The second paradigm draws attention to the 'misty' governance context surrounding 'successful' air transport policies in the Gulf. On the one hand, Dubai adopts ultra-liberal 'open skies' policies where every carrier is welcome to compete with Emirates (e.g. Flanagan, 1996). Qantas, for instance, will start using Dubai as a secondary hub alongside Singapore. However, on the other hand, it has been argued that Dubai cross-subsidizes its flag carrier by masking its true financial performance. For instance, it is claimed that Emirates is able to reduce its borrowing costs below market rates by taking advantage of its government shareholders' sovereign borrower status (e.g. Knorr and Eisenstein, 2007).

The debate on the growing connectivity of Gulf cities in air transport networks is of course far more multilayered and refined than suggested here. But the key point for us is that in such analyses the focus invariably rests with 'market factors', 'business models', etc. 'Geography' only enters the fray when the 'strategic position' of Gulf cities is mentioned, or – somewhat more implicitly – through Orientalized readings of the regional context of 'doing business'.

Figure 2. Different rationales for the 'Dubai model' in a single Emirates advertisement – objective and constructed centrality in the global economy

We believe that (political) geographers have much more to offer. Our starting point is thereby not so much that the above readings are 'wrong', but rather that concepts such as space, locality and geographical networks are relegated to neutral parameters that are 'out there', waiting to be discovered and put to proper use. However, it is clear that in the context of the globalization of urban economies these concepts are in fact politically, socially and discursively constructed. We briefly explore two examples of the implications of such mechanisms for

understanding the Gulf's large-scale air transport expansion.

It is useful to bear in mind that, in the Gulf region, power struggles are directly related to the region's political and territorial fragmentation. After the gradual retreat by the British from the region over the period 1961-71, regional political elites coming from various clan backgrounds either pursued the path of full sovereignty (e.g., Bahrain and Qatar), or chose a form of cooperation with a substantial degree of autonomy (e.g. Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)). In each of these cases, the boom of the oil economy spurred rapid growth of the dominant urban center, leading to a de facto political-geographical constellation of (quasi) city-states (Sidaway, 2008). Why can this be important?

First, power struggles among autocratic elites in the Gulf region leads to rationalizing irrational 'infrastructure' development. Today's economic diversification policies away from oil dependence are characterized by massive infrastructure investments, with air transport infrastructure a conspicuous example (Bloch, 2010; Bowen & Cidell, 2010). Dubai has been the main example here, since its limited oil resources forced its elites into other strategies from the very inception of their quasi-sovereignty. Under the 'visionary' guidance of the autocratic Al-Makhtoum family, Dubai thus engaged in a broad-scale city-marketing strategy copied from other 'successful' entrepreneurial city-states such as Singapore. The Dubai model essentially envisioned the attraction of capital flows through a strategy of rapid and massive infrastructural developments, the implementation of a business-friendly regulatory framework, and intense place-marketing targeted at international luxury tourism (see, for instance, the other dimension of the Emirates advertisement in Figure 2). Invariably, this implied introducing state-of-the-art infrastructures as 'phallic' symbols for international prominence, essential to realize a self-fulfilling prophecy (Bassens et al., 2010a). In air transport terms, these strategies are marshaled through both a 'national' airport and a flag carrier as unmistakable symbols of the city-state's vision on territorial sovereignty. Dubai's 'successful' strategy has thereupon been mimicked by other (quasi) city-states in the region, whereby the rationale of being competitive amongst peers further normalizes speculative infrastructure developments at the level of individual city-states. Overall, then, the danger of a classical tragedy of the commons summarized in figure 1b is not so much a product of 'Oriental irrationality', but rather contingent on the region's political-geographical constellation.

Second, it can be argued that the instant construction of airline connectivity is expected to facilitate a wider self-fulfilling prophecy in which Gulf cities are to become part of the 'universe' of global cities (Acuto, 2010). Aggressive air transport investments can thereby be interpreted as a strategy to defining and influencing the discursive space about the role and position of individual cities in a global, urban-centered economy (cf. Engelen & Glasmacher, 2012). Such an entrepreneurial strategy is, of course, not a Gulf invention per se. It draws on a long tradition of strong quasi city-states that use infrastructural investments to become both an entrepôt and a destination for globalized capital. In the case of Hong Kong's flag carrier Cathay Pacific, for instance, the tagline 'Asia's world city' is used to define and construct the role of the city-state in the global economy. Another well-known example is that of Singapore, where the combination of huge investments in (air)port infrastructure and a free-market doctrine jump-started the economy through the attraction of globalized capital flows (Olds & Yeung, 2004). Yet, what seems particular about the Gulf model is the normalization of massive infrastructure investments through self-orientalizing discourses that project global geo-economic shifts (i.e. 'the rise of the East') onto the role that particular cities are bound to play in such a reOriented world. For instance, the most powerful contemporary mantra is that Gulf cities are deemed the designated hubs for connecting East and West, and this through recycling and reviving earlier spatial representations such as a 'New Silk Road' (see also The Economist, 2010b). Importantly, these images also resonate with the popularization of Gulf cities by

investment banking communities and financial media as profitable emerging markets aka 'global cities' in and by themselves (Bassens et al, 2010b).

Taken together, the Gulf case clearly shows that that 'economic rationalities' as engendered in massive air transport development (i) need to be situated in political-geographical contexts, and (ii) are being normalized through (self)constructed metageographical narratives at various scales. Following McCann and Ward (2010), this affirms the existence of the tension between the 'territorial' and 'relational' construction of urban development rationalities. In this respect, the Gulf case also reveals an interesting paradox: ambitions of free-market modernity can actually be propagated through an actively constructed orientalist repertoire, because of its ability to synchronize with images that are common currency in global financial discourses. Our main contention, then, is that revealing such processes and paradoxes would help the literature on the Gulf's remarkable infrastructure expansion move beyond treating space as an epiphenomenon, and assert the indispensability of geographical scholarship in such literatures.

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