From City State to Medina: The Timeless Wisdom of Aristotle's Polis

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From City State to Medina:
The Timeless Wisdom of Aristotle’s Polis

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for MOR: Multiculturalism and Human Rights, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2022
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Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking Taieb Belghazi, my academic director, who is one of the nicest and smartest people I have met. His help has been indispensable to my learning in Morocco, whether it be his lectures, feedback, or the poetic reflections on our experiences which he has shared. In many ways I see Taieb as an archetype for the man I would like to be when I grow older: wise yet humble, funny yet caring, and loves sitting around with a cup of tea considering a diverse array of thoughts and premonitions. A friend of mine once told me that true intelligence requires humility (although she said it far more eloquently), and Taieb embodies this sentiment incredibly well. I would also like to thank my research adviser, Mourad Mkinsi, who has the distinct skill of making every conversation we share more enjoyable and inspiring than the last. It was under his guidance and encouragement that this project was completed. Lastly, I would like to thank my father, whose philosophical ramblings throughout my youth inspired my passion for the examined life, and my mother, whose unabashed spirit for cross cultural exploration made me the man I am today.
Abstract

Many philosophers and thinkers have considered the idea of community and what makes it strong, beneficial, and enduring. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is no exception. Aristotle wrote thoroughly on the nature of the ideal community, which he observed in Greek city-states. Called a “polis”, this ideal community, according to Aristotle, is one that provides for its residents to live a good life above all else. In doing so, it usually is small enough that all its residents share a similar lived experience while being big enough to be self-sufficient. While Aristotle wrote on this subject over 2000 years ago, his teachings on community are still relevant today.

In this paper, I examine the social, economic, and physical construct of Moroccan medinas through secondary research, primary interviews, and observational research in the medina of Rabat. Medinas are the old walled cities found across North Africa. They consist of weaving streets, interconnecting alleyways, countless shops and small restaurants, and historical buildings such as mosques. While medinas have been around for hundreds of years, modern cities have sprawled around them, and the modern medina is an outpost of preserved history and culture surrounded by modernization. Inside the walls, however, remains the strong communities formed by the proximity of living quarters and similar lived experiences. I begin by examining Aristotle’s teachings before bringing up the Arab philosopher Al-Farabi, and then shifting to discussing the history and modern context of the medina. Then, I examine and synthesize the findings from my interviews to paint of a picture of the modern culture of the medina and analyze it in the context of the Aristotelian theory discussed earlier. By the end, I present a comprehensive picture of life in the modern medina and examine it through the lens of the Aristotelian idea of the polis.

Keywords

Morocco, Philosophy, Aristotle, Community, Development Economics
Notes on Methodology and Approach

Of the many different research ideas which I was drawn to during my first two months in Morocco, from the experience of Sub-Saharan migrant entrepreneurs to the American Football culture in Morocco, I kept being drawn back to the idea of the medina. The Rabat medina, the old walled city I have lived in for most of my time here, seemed like a research interest which would be the truest to my experience in Morocco. The medina welcomed me when I first came, and provided with me with friends, family, unique experiences, and lots of good food. The longer I lived in the medina, spoke with those around me, and engaged in the culture, the more I understood how special and unique this place was. Life within its walls was distinct to the larger city outside but also anything I had experienced before. It is with this in mind that I undertook my research.

It is vital to briefly speak on my positionality to the issue. Being an American non-Muslim, I have a set of pre-conceived notions regarding life in Morocco as well as a potentially overly optimistic view of medina life. I lived with a host family in the medina, but, along with the language barrier, I likely did not have an experience in the medina which completely resembles that of its native residents. Therefore, my personal observations must be understood within this context.

By nature, this paper draws extensively upon Aristotle’s teaching on human flourishing and communities. While Aristotle had many groundbreaking teachings on the human experience, he also was a product of his time and culture and believed troubling notions such as his belief that women were not as rational as men and thusly not able to flourish. I will be following in the footsteps of modern philosophers and scholars who toss these troubling and outdated views to the side to focus on his extensive wisdom regarding the human experience. I believe that his troubling views do not prevent us from learning from Aristotle and using his concept of the polis, as a community which allows us to develop and express our natural human capacities, to examine modern life.
Introduction

Aristotle writes extensively on the nature of the Greek “polis”, or city-state, asserting that humans are beings of the polis by nature. The polis is an emergent order of the human condition organized to the ends of promoting human flourishing. The idea of the polis came into existence out of humans seeking organization to enhance their lives. To this end, the polis typically takes on the following characteristics:

1. It creates and sustains circumstances under which its inhabitants can fully achieve virtue and flourishing (which is the full development and expression of our true human capacities—rational virtuous activities). Among its inhabitants there is a shared understanding of virtue.
2. It is small enough to ensure that its inhabitants largely share similar values and lived experiences.
3. It is also big enough that it can meet all the basic needs of its inhabitants.

While Aristotle’s teachings on the polis were based on the city-states of Greece, many communities that we find ourselves in today resemble the polis. The Moroccan medina is a great case example of the Aristotelian idea of the polis. Most medinas are small enough to ensure that their inhabitants share similar values and experiences while also meeting all their basic needs.

In this research paper, I will examine the Rabat medina through the lens of the polis, questioning the extent to which its community lives up to the Aristotelian ideal. I will first discuss Aristotle’s teachings on the polis and then highlight the history of the medina, the context of Rabat’s medina in the greater community of Rabat-Salé, and utilize firsthand interviews from inhabitants of the Rabat medina. Through this process I will put forth a comprehensive yet focused picture of the Moroccan medinas and an analysis of the degrees to which they enable flourishing and provide dignity for the members of the communities which constitute them.

I – Aristotle’s Polis and Human Flourishing

Before looking at the Moroccan medina, we will discuss the Aristotelian teachings which lay the groundwork for our analysis. In his works Nicomachean Ethics and Politics, Aristotle outlines a model for human action in the context of the state, or polis. According to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, “the goal of choice and action is the human good, namely, living well”. (pg 51) Furthermore, they elaborate on this human good:
The end in all action, the good for man, is happiness (eudaimonia)… Eudaimonia is not a static state of the soul but a kind of activity (energeia) of the soul – something like human flourishing”. (pg 51)

This lays the groundwork for Aristotle’s definition of the polis, which he describes as an emergent entity of human organization designed to serve a “natural function” (pg 51). This state, according to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, has the promotion of eudaimonia, specifically, “fostering the complete and self-sufficient lives of its citizens” (51), as its chief goal. Jonathan Barnes, in his Aristotle: A Very Short Introduction, echoes this sentiment, writing, “The ‘good life’ which is the goal of the State, is identified with eudaimonia, which is the goal of individuals” (128). It is within this context that we will examine Morocco’s medinas. We will analyze their social, economic, and political dynamics to question if it lives up to Aristotle’s definition of the polis—an emergent organization created to promote the flourishing of its citizens.

With this understanding of both Aristotle’s goal of human life, eudaimonia, and the goal of the polis in promoting that, we will dive into what Aristotle means by eudaimonia. This will allow us to more accurately analyze Moroccan medinas to see how and the extent to which they promote eudaimonia for their residents. From Cambridge Companion to Aristotle, “Living a well-lived life is the best possible good for man, and this is what it is to succeed as a human being. Living well means living one’s life under the guidance of the virtues of the soul” (202). Therefore, living in a polis means living in a community which creates the circumstances for one to live a virtuous life. Humans can achieve eudaimonia through doing this. An analysis of the Moroccan medinas, then, must consider the extent to which they support their residents in living a virtuous life to the ends of finding eudaimonia, or flourishing. This idea of flourishing or eudaimonia might look different to each person, but “the man of virtue finds it satisfying to live up to his ideals” (203). In this way, a life of flourishing may also include having wisdom, maintaining positive relationships, and engaging in activities that bring you pleasure. These will vary from person to person, however.

Geographic proximity is not enough to provide opportunities for flourishing to residents of the state. For a community to be an Aristotelian polis, the residents must also have a shared system of values. Jonathan Barnes quotes Aristotle’s writing in Politics:

“It is evident that a state is not a sharing of locality for the purpose of preventing mutual harm and promoting trade. These things must necessarily be present if a state is to exist; but even if they are all present a State does not
thereby exist. Rather, a State is a sharing by households and families in a good life” (128).

Aristotle emphasizes the role of sharing a pursuit of eudaimonia as that which bonds disparate households together into a polis. Barnes also paraphrases Aristotle, “What is peculiar to men, compared to the other animals, is that they alone can perceive the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, and the rest – and it is partnership in these things which makes a household and a State” (127). More specifically than just a shared pursuit of a good life, then, it is this shared sense of virtue which allows humans to thrive in a State. Doubters of this notion can participate in a thought experiment where they imagine life in a community of people whose value systems are diametrically opposed to their own. They can then question the degree to which they would be able to flourish. They may find it difficult to do so. Therefore, to be a polis, the residents must generally share a similar view of virtue. This will be important for our analysis, as Moroccan medinas are known for their significant religious influence.

Another key characteristic of the polis is its limited size. Aristotle writes, “A State cannot be made from ten men – and from 100,000 it is no longer a State” (Barnes 127). Barnes continues, “[Aristotle] never lost his conviction that the small city-state was the right – the natural – form of civil society” (127). This is crucial context because it is the small size of the polis that allows for its citizens to effectively pursue eudaimonia. The community is strengthened by the smaller size, which is more enriching to human life. If the community were to be too large, it would cease to be a polis as Aristotle describes. To effectively provide for its residents to pursue eudaimonia, a state must not be too small or large.

More than just size, a polis must also reward the pursuit of leisure, which Aristotle emphasizes as more important to work. According to Edith Hall in Aristotle’s Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life (2019), Aristotle defined leisure as the traditional notion, “necessary relaxation after work; bodily rest and recuperation, the fulfillment of natural bodily appetites for food and sex, and amusement” (184), but also as including “every other form of activity in which humans engage after fulfilling the laborious tasks necessary to secure the means of survival” (184). We will examine Aristotle’s emphasis on leisure, then, with knowledge of his definition of the concept. According to Hall, Aristotle believed that work and recovery from work were not ends in themselves but were means through which humans can further their pursuit of eudaimonia. In fact, Aristotle believed that it is only through leisure that our full human potential can be realized. Thus, we can see how a community must also provide for fruitful leisure should it classified as an Aristotelian polis.
Aristotle’s philosophy also emphasizes the importance of raising children. He believed that raising children was important in the context of the community as well, “Men must rather be well trained and habituated, under the guidance of the community’s laws, customs, and education, and the discipline of the family” (Cambridge Companion to Aristotle 213). A key component to this quote is how Aristotle highlights the importance of the community’s laws, customs, and education in raising children. Children, then, must be raised in the context of the community they grow up in. This is a key to the Aristotelian polis, and this teaching provides important background for another characteristic of the polis which we have discussed: a shared system of values. This supports Aristotle’s ultimate claim that humans are, by nature, polis beings.

At this point, we have outlined a comprehensive picture of Aristotle’s polis as an emergent community which is organized to promote the flourishing, or eudaimonia, of its residents. As Barnes notes, “Society and the State are not artificial trappings imposed upon natural man: they are manifestations of human nature itself” (127). Because we naturally flock towards communities such as these, Aristotle believed that humans are “political animals” (Barnes 127), the term “political” referring to the polis in this case. Within this polis, humans are more fully able to pursue their purpose, which is to find eudaimonia. The polis does this through a few key characteristics: it provides for its residents to seek eudaimonia, it is small enough to ensure shared value systems, provides for its residents’ basic needs, and provides for leisure. With this definition of the polis, we will begin to examine the Moroccan medina, its history, modern context, and the extent to which it resembles a modern-day example of Aristotle’s polis.

II – Al Farabi: The Perfect City as a Polis for the Arab World

Having discussed Aristotle, we will now briefly turn to Al-Farabi, a 10th century philosopher known to Arab scholars as the “Second Aristotle” (Kopecká 2015). This will give us a new perspective on Aristotle’s ideas of the polis in the context of the Arab world. One of Al-Farabi’s most well-known pieces is his On the Perfect City, a treatise on the requirements for a perfect city which draw upon both Aristotle and Plato’s teachings, among others. Like Aristotle’s teachings, Al-Farabi’s On the Perfect City was mainly, “a comprehensive study of human being” (Kopecká 3) and he claims that “‘happiness’ is the only good without qualification and it is the ultimate end which each political organization should follow” (Kopecká 3). In this way, Al-Farabi’s teachings were very similar to those of Aristotle regarding the good life and the constitution of a polis.
Al-Farabi also agreed with Aristotle regarding the nature of humans. He believed that humans were polis beings by nature, as did Aristotle. Kopecká summarizes Al-Farabi’s view as follows, “Human desire to live in a society by his nature, because only by living among others could be attained saʿada – happiness, which is result of human way toward perfection”. Al-Farabi’s treatise *On the Perfect City* stands out, however, in its description of the extent to which people can achieve happiness:

“But since people differ in numerous ways, there are also different degrees of happiness and also various ways of achieving it, accordingly. Therefore not every citizen of the perfect city will achieve the same level of happiness…Individuals are not self-sufficient beings and all citizens of perfect state have to cooperate with another in order to achieve true happiness and self-realization, according to their own function or place in society” (Kopecká 3)

This is a key aspect to Al-Farabi’s idea of the perfect city and may provide some insight into social structures of the Moroccan medinas.

The last aspect of Al-Farabi’s philosophy on the perfect city which we will discuss is that of “tadbīr”, or the idea of *order and harmony*. He mentions both *tadbīr* in the physical structure of the world but also in the structure of the human self and posits that a perfect city must also be ordered and harmonious (Kopecká 4). These represent a small sample of Al-Farabi’s extensive teachings but provide some relevant teachings after our discussion of Aristotle. While inspired by Aristotle’s teachings, Al-Farabi’s philosophies will provide us some context in the Arab world as we examine the medina.

### III – A Historical and Cultural Background of the Medina

Before diving into the dynamics of the Rabat medina, it is critical to understand some context surrounding the Moroccan medinas. Medinas in Morocco, as in many North African nations, are the walled, old cities, which contain a maze of small streets and alleys. Most, including Rabat’s medina, now represent small districts of the much larger cities that have developed around them. Most are characterized by historical buildings, mosques, large thoroughfares that spread out into small, weaving roads and alleyways, and open-air markets. The modern medinas, as they did originally, provide for almost all the needs of their residents while still having “rich and multi-layered Arab Muslim traditions and intangible heritage” (Bigio 2012). This is one key characteristic of Aristotle’s polis. There are stores selling everything imaginable for low prices, cheap restaurants, and food stalls,
and even people selling individual cigarettes on the street. Most medinas are not car friendly, and pedestrians rule the road. This helps build community and is an important part of what makes medina life distinct from other communities.

While these medinas can be found across North Africa, the Moroccan medinas are distinct themselves. From Lucien Godin and Gérard Le Bihan (2012):

“Morocco features 31 medinas that first and foremost represent an urban and social reality and therefore cannot be confined to a heritage status anymore, or to a supporting role for historic, architectural or religious landmarks.”

They note that, while the medinas are naturally historic and religious landmarks, they primarily are an “urban and social reality”, and thus must be treated in this context. Unlike many other religious or historical landmarks, the medinas remain as lively and inhabited as they always have been. People continue to live their lives and raise their families within their walls. Thus, we must understand medinas as primarily representing a modern social reality instead of a historical marvel, even as they represent both. Godin and Le Bihan continue to underscore the complex constitution of the modern medina:

“These old walled cities suffer from the repercussions of an urban expansion where their role had not been set out clearly: medinas can act at one and the same time as (i) havens for the poorest who cannot find shelter in the slums; (ii) as the locus of a cultural tourism that can take the extreme form of a fascination for all things ‘oriental’ and for which the phrase ‘riyard fever’ has been coined; (iv) as seedbeds of religious fundamentalists; (iv) as undisputed hubs for trade and traditional crafts (souks); and finally (v), as religious and spiritual landmarks.”

They highlight the myriad roles that the medinas embody, from shelter to the society’s poorest to an attraction for rich tourists chasing a dream of Morocco. It is with this understanding that we will examine the Rabat medina. As a complex, multi-layered manifestation of Moroccan urban and social reality.

A key of Moroccan medinas is how they act as a vessel for preserving the Moroccan cultural legacy. Bigio and Licardi, in their 2010 paper, describe the medinas as, “the physical representation of social and cultural identities that are at the origin of the Arab world”. This sentiment was shared by a 21-year-old resident of Rabat’s medina, who we will call Younes, for privacy purposes. When interviewing Younes for this research, I asked him about the ways in which medinas are important to Moroccan society and he responded, “the history and legacy of Morocco lives in the medina. This home we’re in is more than 100 years old. So, the legacy of Rabat is here in the medina”. This was a point of pride for Younes, who was happy to have a role in living out that legacy.
It is important to note that the Rabat medina faced an exodus post-Moroccan Independence in 1956, as wealthier Rabati flocked to the now abandoned French colonial parts of town. Even now, the more affluent regions of Rabat are concentrated in areas previously colonized by the French, such as Agdal-Ryad. Much of youth culture, modern shopping, luxury living, and global brands, is concentrated in Agdal, away from the medina. The contrast between the old Medina and the French colonial part of town is stark. Anyone who looks down National Route 1 (NR1), which separates the walled medina from the center city of Rabat, will notice the contrast. On one side stand the medina walls as they have for centuries, and on the other side of NR1 stand tall French apartment buildings which more than double the height of the medina walls. In Rabat, this contrast between traditional Moroccan style of living and the French influence is physically built into the fabric of the city.

There are also interesting dynamics at play surrounding who chooses to live in the medina and why. Godin and Le Bihan affirm that post-independence, many more affluent Moroccans moved out of medinas towards city centers, but also note that, “This emigration was at first largely compensated for by an influx of rural immigrants who could not find places to live in the slums and found low-skilled work opportunities in the medinas.” (144). Younes told me his father chose to move from a
rural village in the South to the Rabat medina to provide his children with more opportunities, “my father chose to sacrifice for his family, and provide for more opportunities for good jobs and education for us by moving to the Rabat medina”. Because of the high concentration of businesses and foot traffic, the medinas are thriving hubs for commerce, most of it informal. (Godin and Le Bihan 148). This helps to attract low-skilled workers and those looking for affordable housing.

Commerce is the lifeblood of the modern medina. A short walk through the Rabat medina will have you interact with countless vendors, both formal and informal. In fact, the medina, with its abundant products and low prices, attracts Rabati from all over the city for their shopping. You would be hard pressed to find someone who has spent any time in Morocco and has not bought something in the streets of the medina, either in a store or off a tarp on the ground. These medina businesses represent the most essential form of business owners providing value to their customers. The medina businesses contain a vast diversity of product, from spices and food to knock off designer shoes, clothes, and accessories, to traditional Moroccan crafts and more. Most of these businesses are informal, meaning they are not registered with the state and, in turn, pay no taxes and face little regulation. In a sense, a libertarian’s dream.

Understanding the Moroccan informal economy is crucial to understanding the medinas. Dr. Mohammed Masbah, President & Founder of the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, has done extensive research on the state of the Moroccan informal economy. He discusses the dynamics of the informal economy, “the traditional social contract is that the government turns a blind eye to tax evasion and provides some limited government services but expect people to give up some freedoms in return”. Without the informal businesses, however, it’s hard to see how the Moroccan society would continue to provide for people’s basic needs. The medina, a hub for commerce, is driven by the informal economy. According to Masbah, the informal economy comes out of the formal economy being slow and the government being stagnant. People still need to eat, however, and the informal economy emerges out of this conflict. It makes sense that the emergent order of the informal economy, then, would thrive in the emergent order of the medina. Godin and Le Bihan affirm this, noting, “so far, medinas have managed to maintain their economic role, even if through micro-businesses (of the 91,000 businesses identified in the medinas, 57 per cent are individual businesses)” (147).

The rise of the informal economy makes more sense in the context of the decreased interest in investing in medinas within the state which occurred in the late 20th century. Marcello Balbo, in “Rethinking Medinas in a Changing Mediterranean” (2012), writes:
“The 1990s was characterized by the economic liberalization and the shrinking role of the state…Urban planning, already weak, was mostly seen as an obstacle to new investment. With economic liberalization, public investment in the historic city came to an end, or, in the few cases where rehabilitation projects were in place, was significantly reduced. At the same time conservation of cultural heritage was no longer viewed as an intrinsic element of urban planning.”

So, out of neglect from the state, the medinas were largely left to fend for themselves when it came to both economic and social organization. Despite this, the community of the Moroccan medinas have continued to thrive, grow, and affirm their rich cultural heritage.

As touched on before, the coalescence of the availability of low-skilled labor and cheap housing means that medinas often act as solace for lower-income Moroccans, immigrants, or Moroccan rural expatriates. Gidon and Le Bihan note:

“Medinas provide a very important vector of economic and social integration for rural migrants: going rents are lower than in the slums (the main reasons being the large amount of the Habou housing stock and an abundance of abandoned buildings available for squatting), with the souks and small traditional businesses providing all sorts of low-skilled jobs.

While medinas often provide housing and jobs for low-income individuals, there has been a definite rise in interest among foreign tourists and investors, and often time renovation interests can have ulterior motives. Marcello Balbo, in “Rethinking Medinas in a Changing Mediterranean” (2012), writes:

“In many cases [large Moroccan homes] are transformed for tourism activities such as luxury restaurants and hotels or up-market arts and crafts emporia to meet the demand from the globalized tourist in pursuit of authenticity. On the other hand, the historic city continues to be a place where the large majority of the population is comprised of low-income families, who find themselves obliged to live in the medina because of a lack of alternatives but would like to move to other parts of the city that offer better living conditions.”

With this context, we can see a comprehensive picture of what the medinas mean to Moroccan society and the complexities that they face moving forward. Foreign investment seeking a true Moroccan experience threaten to alienate and price out the residents of the medina who create that true Moroccan experience. Many of these people came to the medina looking for cheap housing or work but may now have to reckon with rising prices associated with foreign interest. Next, let’s investigate the modern dynamics and competing interests which define life in the medinas.
IV - Modern Context of the Medina in a Rapidly Globalizing Morocco

Morocco was not immune to the slow economic growth that followed many post-colonial countries, and by the 1980’s was suffering under mass amounts of debt. With support from the IMF, Morocco was able to undertake free market reforms and strengthen their currency. This set the stage for Morocco to transform into a leading Arab economy which is increasingly gaining access to the Western economic system (CIA World Factbook). After King Mohammed VI began his rule in 1999, Morocco has experienced steady GDP growth as well as low inflation, hovering at or below 2% (prior to the COVID pandemic). The 21st century has also brought exceptional debt management for Morocco, with the national debt sitting at a healthy 76% of GDP. This allows the government to invest in modernization projects and related endeavors to improve the country and economy. Mohammed VI has focused a lot of this investment on modernizing large cities while protecting and rehabilitating their cultural heritage.

Despite existing within in rapidly urbanizing cities in Morocco, the medinas “have usually kept their old walls and preserved their original urban fabric” (Godin and Le Bihan 2012), and Rabat’s medina is no exception. Rabat’s medina has remained a center for commerce, community, and historical preservation in the face of widespread investment and reform in Rabat. Right outside of the medina, for instance, lays tracks for Rabat’s sleek tram car system, which takes Rabati and visitors alike past the medina to Agdal-Ryad and to Salé, Rabat’s sister city. Walking out of the medina down Mohammed V Avenue will bring you past the Moroccan central bank, Moroccan Parliament, movie theaters playing French films, a grand train station and a contemporary art museum. The preservation of Rabat’s medina has kept alive a piece of Moroccan heritage and provided a vibrant community for many, but also stands defiant, in an unmissable contrast to the rapid growth of the rest of Rabat.

In 2014, King Mohammed VI announced a sweeping revitalization program aimed at Rabat, entitled “Rabat: City of Lights, Moroccan Capital of Culture”, which set aside $150B for modernizing Rabat. King Mohammed VI announced this program at a ceremony, declaring:

“This five-year program, which will allow the nation's capital to measure up to the world's major cities, revolves around seven main areas, namely the promotion of the cultural heritage of the city, the preservation of green spaces and the environment, improving access to local social services, strengthening governance, the revitalization of the urban fabric, boosting economic activity, and strengthening road infrastructure, he said”
Focusing on the Bouregreg River Valley, which separates Rabat from its sister city, Salé, this program is responsible for impressive developments such as the Grand Theater of Rabat, Salé Marina, and the Mohammed VI Tower. These infrastructure projects are on par with those of any premier global city and mark an important step forward in putting Morocco in step with leaders in the world economy. While this is a great economic and social boon to Morocco, it also may exacerbate a previously existing disconnect between the “old” and “new” cities.

The World Bank, in their Country Economic Memorandum for Morocco, note that Morocco’s slow GDP growth rate since the 1990’s is at least partially responsible for the large standard of living gap to Europe. This investment program, then, is an important next step in accelerating the growth of Morocco so that the standards of living gap to Europe will begin to close. From a report on the investment by Isabella Wang from Morocco World News:

“There is a seemingly compelling economic rationale behind the development projects. King Mohammed VI has commanded large-scale urban and regional developmental programs to promote economic growth. Economic growth is critical for Rabat and Morocco in order to generate taxes for welfare and social development.”

With this context, then, we can see how this large-scale investment in Rabat will be important to closing the standard of living gap with Europe, and broadly help Morocco become more integrated with the global economy.

Any investment on this scale needs to account for the interests of all the residents as well as the history of the location. According to Wang, this may be an
issue for Rabat’s development, as “there is little room for local authorities in the design sector to propose cultural initiatives and to improve the local institutions which sustain Morocco’s cultural history and interweave a rich array of Arabic, Amazigh, European, and African influences”. While these impressive projects, such as the Salé Marina, the Grand Theater of Rabat, and the Mohammed VI Tower, are putting Rabat on the global stage, local influences on the projects are rather limited. Rabat’s old market in the medina sits well within view of these mega projects, but its artisans feel questionably excluded from the development. Wang writes, “competition with a new upscale industry only threatens the commercial existence of the medina and in turn the economic sustenance of its citizens”.

This view has also been echoed by scholars, such as Professor Olivier Toutain in 2011 interview with Justin McGuinness. He spoke about how the Rabat authorities view the medina as dirty and are in favor of initiatives to clean out the street vendors and snack vendors to create a more “presentable” area. Toutain also mentioned the “Rabat: City of Lights, Moroccan Capital of Culture” development, calling it “a symbol of derogatory town planning and the product of an elite very eager for modernity”. He stresses how this development project is occurring with little regard for the contemporary issues of poverty and dwindling/depreciating housing stock in the medinas. It will be important, then, moving forward, to consider this how this investment in modernity can happen in tandem with the improvement of the medinas for their natural residents.

The “Rabat: City of Lights, Moroccan Capital of Culture” program has also provided for more cultural events, such as festivals. From the same Morocco World News Report:

“While the mega-projects of Rabat draw in investment and international prestige, the government has also strived to create smaller cultural events which are capturing Moroccan citizens in the new urbanism.”

In the face of the new investment, then, the government is still providing for events that enhance allow Moroccans to be more in touch with their cultural heritage. While these festivals affirm the cultural history of Morocco, they also provide immense economic value for individual vendors and traditional craftsman, many of whom operate within the medina. There are still valid concerns regarding whether these cultural events and festivals truly are enough to preserve Moroccan culture, and by extension, life in the medina. Any investment in the medina or surrounding areas, then, needs to make sure to preserve the circumstances from which medina way of life emerges. Like how the culture of the polis emerges from human nature, the culture and lifestyle of the medina naturally emerged out of the physical organization and was not created. Thus, any change to the medina or the surrounding areas should
take the physical structures and history into account. Should this investment succeed in turning Rabat into a major global city which attracts foreign investment, there may be gentrification of less expensive and more traditional areas of Rabat and Salé which threatens the livelihoods of locals and Moroccan cultural heritage.

An example of medina gentrification comes from nearby Marrakech, a major Moroccan city known for its history, traditional culture, and sprawling old medina. While Marrakech and Rabat are two very different Moroccan cities, some of the effects and causes of gentrification are likely similar. Professor Assia Lamzah, of the Institut National d’Aménagement et d’Urbanisme in Rabat, writes of gentrification in Marrakech in a 2020 article:

“All foreigners install small shops and bazars, offering products to tourists, in their houses within residential areas. This has a considerable impact on social life within these neighborhoods. Also, this urban gentrification contributes to modifying the sociological characteristics of the population residing in the medina and therefore its relationship with space and the landscape.”

Lamzah observes that foreigners who have moved into the Marrakech medina have negative impacts on social life within the communities, often changing the social and physical fabric which constitutes the medinas. She continues to note, “on the part of local residents, this urban gentrification has generated a decrease in attachment and sense of belonging to the medina as the main space of residence and daily life”. With this context, then, we can see how this new investment in Rabat could attract more wealthy foreigners who threaten the history and culture of the medina.

In brief conversations with normal Rabati, however, they do not seem too concerned. My anecdotal impression is that many do not feel threatened by the investment, even if maybe they should be. Instead, they have a more relaxed attitude. A lifelong Rabati told me about a satirical joke many residents of Salé, Rabat’s more working-class sister-city, make about the new Mohammed VI tower:

“There has never been such a tall tower which looks over such miserable people”

V – An Analysis of the Modern Dynamics of the Rabat Medina

The Society and Culture of the Rabat Medina

The medina of Rabat has a rich historical tradition which sets the groundwork for the strong social structure and community. The nature of this community is something we have alluded to frequently but have yet to comprehensively address. In this section, primarily through interviews with Rabati who live in the medina, we will address this.
In almost all my interviews, people just feel as if there’s something special about living in the medina. They cite all sort of reasons why the medina feels special, but they cannot exactly pinpoint why they feel so happy in the medina. Younes, who I mentioned earlier, told me that what he likes the most about the medina is the vibes. He said, “[I like the] vibes. I have of lots of friends, but I feel like they’re family, I knew them when I was young and the strong community [creates good vibes].” This is a common theme in interviews, people are drawn to the strong sense of community which the medina creates. Part of this, I assume, is geographical, as living in such proximity to other families would naturally create close ties. Seeing your neighbors frequently, as well has having similar lived experiences would lead to more feelings of togetherness. These lived experiences are also a crucial part. Being able to relate to people is key to fostering comradery, and those in the medina, by nature of being culturally and geographically close, share similar lived experiences. This is the first of many similarities to the Aristotelian polis, as this feeling of togetherness both speaks to the small size of the medina, as well as how it helps its residents achieve flourishing.

Younes also mentioned feeling supported by the medina community. He gave me an example of a time where everyone was playing soccer and he did not have cleats, “people will just lend cleats to me. So, people are always willing to help, lend when you need, and provide for you”. In this way, your neighbors feel more like your family. They look out for you in the medina in a way that Younes did not feel like communities outside of the medina provided. Another medina resident I spoke with, who we will call Fatima, echoed this sentiment, “there’s a shared sense of caring for one another in the medina, so if your neighbor is in trouble, they will come to you for help.” Younes also mentioned that he felt safe in the medina. He told me that people keep their eyes open and that there is a shared sense of responsibility to keep the community safe. According to Younes, everyone knows who you are, and who your family is. While this means that they look out for you, it also is a strong disincentive for people to behave badly. This, according to Younes, is a big reason many people are drawn to the medina. It is also another indication that the Moroccan medina does, in fact, resemble an Aristotelian polis, as it is small enough that everyone knows one another and there is public accountability.

Fatima, on the other hand, did not agree with Younes that this sense of overbearing was good. While Younes felt that people would be drawn to the medina from the increased sense of safety, Fatima felt scrutinized by it. She told me “I’m not comfortable. I can’t wear anything that I like, especially for us girls, everyone is always looking at us. My mom makes me wear jeans because she doesn’t want the men in the medina to look at me”. This is a good place to begin discussing the spirit of the medina: allowing its residents to pursue eudaimonia. For Fatima, she decisively
told me that the medina actively prevents her from living life as she desired, because of the pressure and scrutiny that she experiences on a day-to-day basis. In this one regard, at least, the medina certainly does not resemble a polis for Fatima.

When asked how the medina allowed him to live his life as he wants, Younes talked of the strong community supporting him to pursue his dreams. He told me, “When your parents live in the medina, they will be open minded, because my parents helped me follow my dream and play professional soccer in Turkey. Because they live in the medina, they feel like they have enough support from the community where they can send me”. Without living in the medina, Younes guesses, his family probably would not have had enough support to send him to Turkey to play soccer. While the medina was likely not completely responsible for Younes being able to follow his dream, he thinks it contributed. In this specific case, the medina does provide for Younes to pursue his dreams and live a virtuous life. The support that Younes’ family felt from living in the medina and being employed in the medina allowed Younes to pursue his life of flourishing.

The medina also resembles the polis in the shared cultural values and sense of virtue. Specifically, Younes highlighted the shared spiritual values of the medina:

“People in the medina share religious values, all of the neighborhood prays frequently and prays at the same mosque. When I see my friends pray together and I do not, I feel jealous, and I want to join. There’s also a shared sense of justice and values around what is acceptable behavior and a way to live your life. I feel like that is a good thing.”

To one who has taken a walk through the Rabat medina, this comment may make sense. The medina is full of mosques, and very often you will see people briefly close their stores or leave their homes to visit a mosque for prayer. The way that the mosques and the prayer structure play an outsized role in medina culture speaks to the shared values of its residents. There is an interest component to this dynamic, however, as Islam is the mandated faith of Morocco and Moroccan people. Regardless of the source of the religious piety, it is clearly an influencing factor, and something that similar communities in places without such religious homogeneity may not experience. In this case, Fatima shared a similar sentiment to Younes, and added that everyone shares a strong sense of care for one another. This sense of care shows that the medinas do have similar values, but they are also helpful in promoting flourishing. In this way, Moroccan medinas resemble the polis by having deeply shared values that may be hard to achieve in other communities.

Younes also gave a great example of how attractive medina life is to people who do not live there. He mentioned how these people often try to befriend people, like himself, who live in the medina, to gain access to the lifestyle. Younes told me:
“You get some experiences in the medina that you can’t get anywhere else. Even if you meet someone outside of the medina, they want to be your friend because you live in the medina, and without you, it’d be hard for them to make friends in the medina.”

So, all that we have discussed up to this point are things that make the medina so desirable that people are trying to make friends for the sole purpose of getting to engage in the medina culture. Younes made a point to emphasize that these people were not interested in him, per se, but just interested in him to the point where he could provide access to the medina life. Hamza, another Rabati and medina resident I spoke to, shared a similar thought. He moved to Rabat for the educational opportunities here as a child from a village in the South of Morocco. Hamza mentioned that without his family already in the medina, he would not have been accepted and would not have made friends. Once you make those, friends, however, they would be great friends and you would be a part of a strong community.

While people may be attracted to experience medina life, there has been a trend among more middle-class Rabati to view medina life as low-class and aspire to leave. Olivier Toutain, in his same interview as cited earlier, noted that the Rabat middle class seeks chiefly to leave the medina, perceiving life there as degrading. In this interview, Toutain notes that most of the middle-class desire to have a home or apartment in Agdal, rather than the medina, which is seen as lower class. So, although Younes reports people wanting to participate in medina culture, there still may be a stigma around medina residency being lower class.

Rabat as an entire city is almost certainly too big to be a polis, but the medina feels small enough to qualify. The physical proximity of the medina allows for its residents to benefit from the communal systems which emerge. Both Younes and Fatima, despite having some fundamental disagreements, believed that the medina had strong, tightly knit community, and Fatima mentioned that such could not be found elsewhere in the city of Rabat.

There is also an element to leisure in the medina that will become clear to anyone who spends time within its walls. Many residents spend time tending to their shops, or simply, sitting in chairs, stoops, and stools throughout the medina. Men spend their time playing cards or drinking tea with friends in the streets, possibly selling a single cigarette from time to time. If not in the streets, the cafés are full of, mostly men, drinking tea while catching up with friends or the headlines. The medina of Rabat seems to fill with an air of leisure after the workday is complete. Younes, along with most young men in the medina, often participate in soccer tournaments at the local medina high school, or at least play pickup games late into the night. This fits well with Aristotle’s definition of the polis and emphasis on the importance of leisure. Much more so than in an American community, where work can be prioritized to the
extent of giving leisure negative connotations. Whether you agree with it or not, an Aristotelian polis is a community that emphasizes the importance of leisure, and Rabat’s medina certainly does that.

The disagreement between Younes and Fatima may give insight into a larger trend that is important to note: how men and women view medina life differently. Younes is a 21-year-old man who is temporarily unemployed, has grown up in the medina, and has a strong community of similarly aged men around him. Fatima is a 20-year-old university student who also lives in the medina but spends most of her social time meeting with friends outside of the medina, in places such as Agdal or the similarly upscale Hay Riad. To Younes, the medina is much more comfortable and welcoming than it is to Fatima, who often feels watched and uncomfortable. It seems certain that, in this case, the medina serves Younes better than it serves Fatima, and in this way, it also resembles a polis more to one individual than another.

The Role of the Informal Economy and Commerce in the Rabat Medina

Employment remains a key issue in Moroccan society, as more and more Moroccans find employment in the informal economy. The informal economy refers to the more casual, less documented forms of employment that can be found across Moroccan cities, but specifically, in medinas. The late-night cigarette salespeople, the people selling pastillas out of buckets, and all the street vendors that constitute medina commerce are members of the informal economy. In fact, these sort of unrecorded transactions, many of which occur within medina walls, constitute a massive part of the Moroccan economy. According to the IMF research cited by Mohsin Khan and Karim Mezran in their article “Morocco’s Gradual Political and Economic Transition”:

“Absent sufficient jobs in the formal economy, Moroccans have been forced into the informal economy, which has grown steadily over time and is estimated now to be nearly one-half the size of the official GDP. By comparison, the informal economy in Tunisia is estimated to be about one-third the size of its GDP, and in Egypt it is close to 40 percent.”

According to the IMF, then, a colossal portion of Morocco’s productivity is created by the informal economy. While this includes a lot of economic activity in rural communities, much of this 50% of GDP number is concentrated in medinas. Any disruption of regular life in the medinas, particularly that which may be sparked by the large-scale development, could seriously threaten the Moroccan economy.

All this being said, however, the Rabat medina thrives on the informal economy, with many finding employment and providing essential services within its
walls. It is a large part of how the medina provides its residents opportunity to find eudaimonia. One of these workers in the informal economy, who we’ll call Saiid, sat down to talk to me about work in the medina. Saiid used to work in the more upscale area of Hay Riad, about a 15-minute drive South of the medina, but now works in a juice stand on Avenue Mohammed V in the medina. He told me that he chose to switch jobs because Hay Riad was just too far away, and the medina was livelier. Working in the medina allows Saiid to be close to home, but also to the friends and activities that he likes doing. This is a significant benefit of working in the medina: you can save money and time with respect to your daily life. Generally, the physical proximity allows its residents to live more fulfilling lives when they can spend resources like time and money more deliberately. Overall, Saiid talked about work in the medina as being more laid back and casual. His boss is his friend, and he can take days off at whim. As we have seen above, the leisure is an important part of the Aristotelian Polis, and even the work life in the medina seems to be built around leisure. He also mentioned that many people in the informal economy chose to live in the medina because of how popular it is. It is just good business to work there. People come from all over the city to do their shopping, meet up with friends, and walk around, so there are ample customers.

In addition to the work culture and density of customers, the physical structure of the medina also supports the informal economy. It is easy to set up shops in the myriad storefronts available, and vendors can set up where they see fit on the street, in a way that seems less common outside of the walls. Mohammed Masbah mentioned this in a lecture—how the physical structure of the medina lends itself to the proliferation of the informal economy. The lower barriers to entry of the medina economy are a main reason why people choose to work here, as Saiid pointed out. The sluggish growth and inaccessibility of the formal economy is a main reason for the rise in the informal economy, as Khan and Mezran (2015) point out, and the medina is a prime location for informal economy workers. The informal economy in general provides participants with economic dignity and a chance to contribute to society in a meaningful way, even if the contribution is small. When a significant amount of this economic activity occurs in the medina, it certainly helps its residents flourish.

Economic activity in the medina, however, is largely concentrated in retail, food service, and traditional crafts. Another Rabati and medina resident I spoke to, who we will refer to as Hamza, mentioned this disconnect. Hamza works as an executive at a technology company in Agdal while also living in the medina. He echoed much of the same comments as Saiid and Younes regarding life and community in the medina but had an interesting perspective to share regarding work. He mentioned that it would be impossible for him to work in technology in the
medina and that it is very unlikely that a technology company could work out of the medina. While he likes the commute for the change of pace it gives him, he noted that the lack of high impact, growth related industries in the medina is a key characteristic. It is much more reliant on fulfilling the basic needs of its residents, many of whom are low income.

In all, the medina is a community that economically provides for people by giving flexible, manageable work in a thriving commercial district. Jobs are close to home and people seem fulfilled by their work. Saiid told me that he was close to everyone on the street, and a benefit of working in the medina was getting to know your neighbors and working in such a tight group of people and vendors. In this way, the work life of the medina seems to help provide for the flourishing of its residents. Not only does it provide dignified employment, but it also contributes to the atmosphere of the medina, its self-sufficiency, and how it provides for the basic needs of its residents, just as Aristotle’s polis does.

**Conclusion: A Return to Aristotle**

“One citizen differs from another, but the salvation of the community is the common business of them all. This community is the constitution; the virtue of the citizen must therefore be relative to the constitution of which he is a member”

—— Aristotle

The medina is a unique part of life across the Arab world, but especially in North Africa. These districts represent modern manifestations of the history, culture, and tradition of the cities in which they reside. Their residents have likely lived there for generations and are active participants in preserving that culture. The physical proximity of homes and streets, and growth of the informal economy has built deep communities in many of these medinas. The influx of foreign tourists and modernization, however, have created layered complexities to modern life in the medina. These diverse, thriving communities are a vibrant and extraordinary manifestation of the human experience. Particularly in Morocco, these medinas preserve Moroccan history and are a unique aspect to modern life. These communities are large enough to be self-sufficient but are still small enough to ensure its residents have similar lived experiences and values which shape daily life. In a way, these Moroccan medinas closely resemble Aristotle's idea of the polis, which was modeled off the Greek city states of over 2000 years ago.

Aristotle wrote extensively on what it means to live a good life and the nature of human beings. He wrote how humans are political beings by nature, referring to
the polis, or city state. We are made to exist in small communities. These communities, he argues, are built around the common goal to live out our human function, which is to flourish. In all the ways that the polis is organized, it optimizes for providing for humans with opportunities to live the good life.

Across primary interviews with Rabati, secondary research, and observations, we can see clearly that the medina closely represents the Aristotelian idea of the polis, although it may do so to varying extents to different people. Perhaps one key similarity is in how the medina and the polis are both emergent orders. In place of rigid planning, these structures emerge out of free human choice. We self-select into groups of people, living arrangements, and daily life choices, and out of them emerge a community which is larger than us. There is something remarkable about the mysterious forces which guide us to inadvertently construct the complex systems that define our lives. That is a key to the Aristotelian polis, but it is also how the Moroccan medinas came into existence and continue to exist. They simultaneously create and are created by the shared human experience which exists within their walls. In this way they are unique in our hyper connected 21st century world and distinctly resemble the Aristotelian polis.

It’s crucial, however, to acknowledge the differing answers across those interviewed. While we should avoid any generalizations due to the small sample size, it is informative that the young men’s perspectives are significantly different from the young woman’s perspective. Men view the medina as being far more welcoming and the community to be more empowering than the women, who view it as being too overbearing and limiting. It might provide fun groups of friends for the men, but for the women it prevents them from wearing what they want and living their lives in the manner which they see fit. Perhaps strict religious tradition and the proximity of residents in the medina augments pre-existing discrepancies between the male and female lived experience in Morocco. For whatever reason, it does provide some limits for our comparison of the medina to the polis. A true polis, in theory, should provide for all residents equally. Al-Farabi’s more hierarchical approach to city organization, however, may find solace in these findings. Especially considering that Moroccan medinas do in fact exist in the Arab world, as did Al-Farabi.

This line of thinking begs some further questions regarding our findings. Because Aristotle’s city states were largely alone, one might wonder if the polis can exist in the context of a larger 21st century city. This is to question the extent to which the polis can exist in the medina when you can just go hang out with your friends in Agdal. For people who find leisure or employment outside of the walls of the medina, even just a block, does this threaten it being a true polis? This line of thinking also should account for the hyperconnectivity of modern day. Do people find their polis online, and by extension, can the polis transcend geography? Does a new definition
need to be constructed entirely? It seems like there may be no community which truly resembles the polis. These are all good questions which emerge from our examination of the medina, but none necessarily disprove a connection between the medina and Aristotle’s polis. Instead, they offer interesting thought exercises regarding the definition of the polis and the implications of applying ancient thought to modern day issues.

Taken in total, it seems that the medina can resemble the polis to differing extents to differing people, which, in practicality, may be as close as we get to a modern manifestation of the theory of a thinker 2000 years gone. There is still, however, significance to the strength and complexity of the medinas, which emerge naturally out of human behavior and provide eudaimonia, just as Aristotle surmised. In this way they resemble the medina; even if not completely, they certainly do in spirit.
Afterword

This research could be extended by conducting more interviews across a large population group. Notably, interviews with older residents, sub-Saharan migrants, either on their way to the West or those who have settled in Morocco, and residents who live outside of the medina on their perceptions. It could also look at differences across different medinas, notably those in Marrakech, Fes, Tangier, or Essaouira, among others. My interviews mainly sought to gain broad impressions of the community and lifestyle of the medina in the context of Aristotle’s teachings on the polis. Further interviews could examine different aspects of medina life in more depth, such as the religious atmosphere, the microeconomic systems, the presence of poverty, family life, generational wealth building, the presence of foreign investment, and much more. Further research could also critique Aristotle’s definition of the polis, as I began to briefly in the conclusion, or provide insight into how authorities can manage the growth and investment in the medina to protect all the residents.
References


