

Emerging Global Cities: Origin, Structure, and Significance

By Alejandro Portes and Ariel C. Armony, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

Pp. 368. \$35.00 / £30.00 (paper).

Luciana de Souza Leão 

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

Email: lsleao@umich.edu

In *Emerging Global Cities*, Alejandro Portes and Ariel Armony explain how and why some cities in the developing periphery are reorganizing global capitalism, while simultaneously dealing with climate change, increasing inequalities, and changes in the nature of labor and migration. In contrast to the usual scholarly focus on cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo, the book explores how three cities—Miami, Dubai, and Singapore—rose from their underdeveloped condition to become important global players in international commerce, finance, the arts, and real estate. To tell this story, the book also examines three additional cities—São Paulo, Lagos, and New Orleans—that tried, but failed, to reach emerging global status, and offers the case study of Hong Kong, which provides important lessons about how cities can lose their “global” status.

Portes' and Armony's first contribution is precisely their comprehensive, comparative scope. They do not restrict their study to the three emerging global cities that “made it,” but use seven cases to provide scope conditions for their argument. The authors effortlessly combine multiple literatures and insights from each of the seven cities to convincingly argue that while cities like Miami, Dubai, and Singapore arrived at their emerging global status in very different ways, they shared several conditions of possibility: their privileged geographical position, strong will among local elites to compete globally, and an institutional apparatus capable and ready to enact necessary changes. These structural similarities allowed these three emerging cities to rise beyond their national borders and become global financial and logistical hubs.

As a comparative sociologist, I found particularly engaging how the authors arrived at their conclusions by comparing these “global cities” with cities they called “global hopefuls.” The cases of New Orleans, São Paulo, and Lagos serve as a counterpoint to those that have reached global status and illuminate the strategic factors that account for the difference. The case of São Paulo, for example, is key for the book's argument. The city has the largest GDP per capita in Latin America and is also a powerhouse in art and finance. Despite being, by most measures, a megacity, São Paulo does not make the cut because it does not reach global status—its importance is limited to Brazil. By contrasting the São Paulo case-study with Miami, for example, Portes and Armony demonstrate that cities reach an emerging global status not because of their size, but for their *functions* in a global context. Thus, Miami's global status is based on its position as a coordinating center for multiple global economic activities, rather than its GDP or other factors (in fact, Miami's GDP per capita is ranked 66th among US metropolitan areas). As the authors explain, when a wealthy Mexican person wants to buy real estate or meet with potential economic partners in South America, they do it in Miami, not in São Paulo.

The authors' second contribution is that they avoid the usual pitfalls of using a modernization theory framework to study the so-called Global South. Throughout the book, Portes and Armony take care to avoid the fallacies that terms like "emergent" can bring, specifically, a hierarchical conception of cities in which North American and European cities are the most desirable, and cities like Miami, Dubai, and Singapore are inherently inferior. This book instead focuses on how cities on the periphery have overcome the heavy burden of underdevelopment and the associated expectations about their proper role in the global economy to climb to positions of greater power. The book thus avoids easy answers about models of urban development that other cities could replicate, as well as easy dichotomies of success and failure in urban development. Instead, the authors invite readers to think about these cities as a spectrum, where something we could consider "success" is multi-causal, historically contingent, and subject to change. To arrive at this point, the book's comparative design is once again key—specifically the case of Hong Kong, which the authors use to highlight threats to emerging global cities. Through Hong Kong, we learn that the status of "emerging global city" is neither static nor irreversible. On the contrary, the authors show how cities can lose their global status for political reasons, like China's recently imposed economic sanctions on Hong Kong, but also because of other factors like climate change and the deep inequalities that characterize urban development.

The book's third major contribution is that, by focusing on emerging global cities, it also invites us to think about new forms of capitalist development. According to Portes and Armony, emerging global cities are located geographically and financially at the edge of the global economy. By "the edge," the authors do not mean on the geopolitical margins, but on the innovative frontiers of capitalism. Miami, Dubai, and Singapore, they contend, represent the latest episode in the continuing evolution of global capitalist development, in which notions of center and periphery do not make sense. Studying cities like Miami, Dubai, and Singapore allows us to see disjunctures in the global economy, wherein these cities harnessed new flows of people, technology, and financial markets to claim the frontier of urban transformation. As such, these emerging global cities illustrate the fact that industrialism and global economic development are not synonyms. These cities do not produce tangible goods but serve as coordinating centers for new global economic functions. They also illustrate that immigration and capitalism are more intertwined than ever before. But like in the past, this transformation is marked by great inequality, in which the experience of a privileged few contrasts markedly with the vast majority.

The book does leave open some questions. One of its main arguments is that political, economic, and physical security are paramount for economic growth and long-term planning. Hence, we learn that Miami, Dubai, and Singapore benefited from instability elsewhere because they had political regimes that were stable and predictable. Yet the authors do not explore important questions about the relationship between stability and political regimes: What are the limitations that authoritarian regimes may put on emerging global cities? Can one keep an edge in the global economy, particularly with innovation and knowledge, when threat of authoritarian repression is constant? Specifically, can these places continue to attract talent? For example, the chapter on Dubai states that very few cities around the world can compete with Dubai in terms of cosmopolitanism, since 90% of the population is foreign-born, representing 200 countries. But can this foreign-born population be free to push for innovative ways of long-term thinking without the fear of political repression? In other words, is democracy, freedom of thought and speech, and a vibrant civil society important for cities to stay at the edge of global economies increasingly based in knowledge production? Relatedly, the book is less precise in its treatment of state theory than in its engagement with urban development scholarship. The authors suggest that in cities like Dubai and Singapore, a highly centralized decision-making apparatus was essential to achieving global status, but they do not explain how these state structures worked in practice. Which parts of the state need to be onboard to launch an emerging global city? Were city planners leading these projects, or financial arms of the state? In other words, the book would benefit from opening the black box of these governments' internal workings to illuminate their paths to success.

Emerging Global Cities is a refreshing book that offers a truly global, comparative, and systematic analysis of urban development at the frontiers of the global economy, moving away from paradigmatic cases in the Global North. In addition to sociologists of cities, scholars in international development and globalization studies should find this book significant. Finally, *Emerging Global Cities* will also be valuable for inequality scholars to explore the negative

socioeconomic consequences of becoming a global city. As Portes and Armony remind us, as in the past, modern urban capitalist development continues to privilege elites, while the vast majority do not benefit from what makes a city “global” in the first place.

ORCID

Luciana de Souza Leão  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7528-4306>