POLYCENTRISM AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY IN METROPOLITAN AREAS

Antonio Aniesa

Head of International Relations, Plaine Commune, France

I n 2016 the New Urban Agenda, adopted at the Habitat III Summit in Quito, made reference to the "right to the city". While some figures involved in the debate welcomed its inclusion, others suggested it risked denaturalizing the concept. After all, when those threatened by an idea fail to completely defeat it, do they not typically attempt to co-opt it?

I. The enshrinement of metropolitan competitiveness

The "right to the city" is undergoing a revival in the debates about urban space. This may be read as an expression of dissatisfaction among urban dwellers, a desire to reappropriate cities, or a reaction to urban transformations driven, in particular, by metropolitanisation, where life disappears behind the concepts of a "business" city, an "attractive" metropolis and of "competitiveness".

Midway through the first decade of the 2000s, it was not exceptional for talk at a colloquium on "*Grand Paris*" to turn to "Greater London", followed (and sometimes preceded) by a presentation of the "global cities ranking". The conclusion was that to avoid losing ground on London, Tokyo and New York – and to prevent other cities catching up – the Paris metropolis must be transformed and become more competitive. Competitiveness, not life, was enshrined as the target of Grand Paris's urgent transformation, and barely any reference was made to the British capital's rising poverty rates and socio-spatial inequalities (Challenges.fr, 2017).

This chapter does not intend to discuss the links between metropolitanisation, neoliberal economic rationales and competition between global metropolises (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2018). It merely notes that they make "attractiveness" the central pillar of the urban debate. This urban transformation strategy for raising financial investment and capital and increasing opportunities for the profitability of capital in the city is part of a trend that has taken hold globally.

The New Urban Agenda made reference to the "right to the city". While some figures welcomed its inclusion, others suggested it risked denaturalizing the concept.

Saskia Sassen (2009b: 263) explains that today's global cities are places where multiple globalisation processes take on concrete, localised forms, as well as places where new forms of power can emerge. Much of the nerve centre of the global economy is concentrated in a network of approximately 40 world cities, forming a "geography of power". Sassen has also described how a new geography of centres and margins in large cities in both the developed and the developing world is contributing not only to reinforcing existing inequalities, but also to mobilising a series of new dynamics of inequality (2009a: 124).

Grand Paris is one of the richest regions in Europe, but also one of its most unequal. The territorial policies that promote attractiveness involve implementing management projects that encourage a dual urbanism to emerge that leaves out entire segments of the urbanised space and the inhabitants (Deboulet et al., 2018: 32). This phenomenon undoubtedly affects the entire urban planet. Indeed, the urban poor represent at least half of the world's urban population, according to relative national poverty thresholds (Davis, 2006: 28).

Henri Lefebvre (1989) wrote that the further the city extends, the more social relations degrade. In both the Global North and South, urban environments are under stress. Cities have become strategic spaces where a series of conflicts and contradictions arise (Sassen, 2009a: 133). Does this justify mobilisations that aim to promote other urban policies? While not necessarily referring to the right to the city, they form part, voluntarily or otherwise, of the idea that those who participate in urban life are entitled to have their claims heard in relation to what they have produced and one of their demands is the right to shape the city in the image of their aspirations (Harvey, 2011: 42).

II. The right to the city in urban agglomerations

But what does the right to the city mean in a metropolitan context? Are the same urban realities experienced in spaces with 10,000, 100,000, 500,000 and several million inhabitants? The same Parisian reality is not experienced in the centre of Paris and in Saint-Denis (a working-class suburb to the north), in Grigny (a working-class neighbourhood 23 km south of Paris), in Marne-la-Coquette (a well-off suburb) and in Champs-Élysées (Paris).

A metropolitan area contains a range of territories, experiences and lives that differ according to where a person lives. This is not to deny that shared problems exist across metropolitan areas. It is an invitation to "decentralise" our approaches to them. It means understanding metropolitan dynamics by starting with the range of real lives that face them. It is about not accepting the unique centralities – geographical, political, economic – that make all the other perceptions of a metropolitan area invisible. In this sense, if we want to speak of the "right to the city", the territories that make it up should not be invisible either. That would be tantamount to making urban lives invisible.

Visibility and promoting another view of metropolises is what the first Forum of Peripheral Local Authorities (FALP) held in Nanterre (France) demanded in March 2006. Metropolitan dynamics were addressed

A metropolitan area contains a range of territories, experiences and lives.

The right to the city in metropolitan areas is based on the idea of "polycentrism".

using experiences from the political and social margins. In his conclusion, Patrick Jarry, the mayor of Nanterre, described the common will to work on unprecedented exchange and sharing of specific practices in the territories, which would contribute to encouraging the construction of democratic, sustainable, caring metropolises. He expressed his aspirations for greater inter-territorial solidarity and justice for their metropolitan areas.

The final declaration of the third FALP in Canoas in June 2013 expanded on this. As working-class territories that are often peripheral or suburban, the peripheral areas FALP brought together were an important part of urban growth. And while their history and futures as local administrations were linked to those of the "central cities", they must not be reduced to merely extending the city's borders. Those in attendance represented a diverse range of realities, subjectivities and sensitivities, but recognised in each other a refusal to be the invisible parts of metropolitan areas, and were convinced that their voices must be heard in order to deal with what is settled in our urban world.[1]

By making their aspirations, experiences and needs as a "city" visible, these peripheral urban territories are working to promote a caring, sustainable and democratic metropolitanisation, and modify the shared spaces of the dominant urban debates. The right to the city is linked to this commitment. FALP II's final declaration stated its commitment to the right to the city and to the development of the rights of the women and men living in them.[2] For FALP, the definition of the right to the city in metropolitan areas is based on the idea of "polycentrism", meaning the right of each territory in these metropolitan spaces to guarantee proximity and attention to different human needs (public services, labour market, green spaces, cultural centres, public spaces, housing). The caring metropolis that is sought will accept no more forgotten spaces or populations.[3] Polycentrism is what guarantees the right to the city in metropolitan areas.

III. Polycentrism as guarantee of the right to the city

The right to the city and the notion of polycentrism are closely related to the history of the struggles by working-class peripheries to "make the city". The industrial revolution drove urban growth faster than at any time in history. A single example will suffice: while it took Paris 1,800 years to reach one million inhabitants (in 1850), over the next 170 years, the agglomeration reached 10 to 12 million. Growth of this magnitude, or even greater, is recorded across the planet. The "city" has overflowed. As Mike Davis has written (2006: 39), the majority of the poor urban population no longer lives in city centres. Since 1970, slums on the peripheries of cities in developing countries have absorbed most of the global urban growth. The suburban areas of many poor cities are already so large that the very concept of peripheries might need to be reconsidered

Henri Lefebvre (1968: 15) wrote that as the periphery extends, a process begins that decentralises the city. Urban awareness dissipates, a deurbanised periphery takes shape around the city that is, nevertheless, dependent on the city. The association of the periphery and the right

The history and the present of many working-class suburbs has consisted of claiming the need to "make the city" to ensure that their future is very different to that of a forgotten periphery.

1. Final declaration of the III FALP, Canoas, June 2013.
2. Declaración final del II FALP, Getafe, June 2010.
3. Final declaration of the III FALP, Canoas, June 2013.

ANTONIO ANIESA

to the city seems, therefore, to be a paradox, but if we do not want to condemn a majority of urban dwellers to invisibility, we must overcome it. We propose to respond to Mike Davis's invitation to reconsider the periphery by introducing the concept of "polycentrism".

Ary Vanazzi, mayor of São Leopoldo, on the outskirts of Porto Alegre (300,000 inhabitants), says that the inhabitants arrived before the city, thus confirming the words of Henri Lefebvre. But Vanazzi added that just as we had to make the city in the past, now we have to continue making it.[4] Jordi Borja (2003: 170) meanwhile emphasises that to make a city is, first of all, to recognise the right to the city for all.

The right to the city can form part of "making the city" if it demands fundamental and radical power to shape the urbanisation processes that constantly transform our cities (Harvey, 2011: 9). The history and present of many working-class suburbs has consisted of claiming the need to "make the city" to ensure that their future is very different to that of a periphery forgotten by imposed urbanisation rationales. Manuel Castells (1975: 6) referred to such struggles in 1970s Spain, describing how thousands of working families in Santa Coloma de Gramanet took to the street for hours to confront the fascist Guardia Civil and claim the right to a single hospital for a city of more than 100,000 people. The local governments of the metropolitan peripheries have played an important role in this regard. Braouezec (2012) writes that in the 21st century metropolis, the recognition of "polycentrism" in terms of proximity has roots in the continuation of the struggles of the residents and many elected local officials from working class suburbs who, throughout the 20th century, mobilised to gain access to collective equipment, public services, to be a *city*, and not simply to be *homes* near factories or mere *dormitory cities.*

According to Mitchell (2014: 320), the right to the city takes the form of a right to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to the rhythms of life and employment of time that allows the full use of these moments and places. If this is so, it can be argued that in the working-class peripheries "making the city" contributes to making the right to the city a reality in the different territories of the metropolis and contributes to creating polycentric metropolitan dynamics. Borja (2003: 318) formulates them as "rights to centrality", whereby all areas of the metropolitan city must possess places that have centrality value and all inhabitants should be able to access urban and metropolitan centres with equal ease. In the metropolitan city, the relationship of the old and new centres, the access and requalification of historical centres not only of the central city but also of the peripheral areas, and the creation of new polyvalent centralities with mixed functions and social composition, are inherent parts of urban democracy.

IV. Metropolitan governance under debate

Demanding "polycentrism" reflects the desire of peripheral cities to be recognised as spaces for life, aspirations and democratic mobilisation in the metropolis. But it is not without controversy. Harvey (2015: 159) says that in polycentric governance, the reproduction of privileges and class power by the resulting polycentric governance is perfectly integrated into

Demanding "polycentrism" reflects the desire of peripheral cities to be recognised as spaces for life, aspirations and democratic mobilisation in the metropolis.

the neoliberal class strategies of social reproduction. This would make polycentrism the opposite of solidarity, helping to favour a kind of "local selfishness" and a tendency for the more affluent not to mix. But Harvey forgets that, in reality, centralised metropolitan configurations offer no guarantees of an equitable distribution of wealth. As with the right to the city, the key is in the correlation of forces that exist in the territories. Of course, the working-class peripheries must have a voice to confront the ideology of competitiveness and the profitability of capital. From this point of view, demanding polycentrism means that the peripheries are recognised as territories that provide solutions to metropolitan challenges. One such challenge is the social fragmentation of metropolitan areas. Though it is sometimes argued that pluri-municipalism is responsible (to justify metropolitan centralisation), in fact the responsibility lies with the prevailing economic rationales. The transformation of the economic activities and the productive systems of the great metropolises leads to selective patterns in intra-urban spaces: spaces of banishment, spaces of attraction (Bretagnolle et al., 2011: 12). Saskia Sassen (2010: 28–29) argues that cities have paid major tribute to the new economic regime. All have undergone the mass displacements of modest homes and unprofitable businesses from the centres of the rehabilitated cities and the new business districts to the urban peripheries.

David Harvey (2011: 87–88) speaks of Engels's prophetic reference to "Haussmanization" to describe the "embourgeoisement" and "gentrification" excluding the working classes from the centre.

In reality the bourgeoisie has only one method of settling the housing question after its fashion … This method is called "Haussmann." … By "Haussmann" I mean the practice, which has now become general, of making breaches in the working-class quarters of our big cities, particularly in those which are centrally situated … No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is everywhere the same: the most scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-glorification by the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but – they appear again at once some where else, and often in the immediate neighbourhood (Engels, 1995 [1873]).

Prevailing economic logics accentuate the socio-spatial fragmentations and constantly create more suburbs that the working classes put up with (as opposed to those chosen by the rich). In these conditions, the demands for "polycentrism" made by local governments in working class suburbs are not a reflection of a kind of "local selfishness", but of a will to "be able to act" through democratic institutions to reject the fate of invisibility, the pure and simple banishment or annexation assigned to them by the prevailing logics. They are a reflection, in short, of the will to guarantee the right to the city in all the areas of the metropolis, especially those most affected by exclusion. Defending their local interests through polycentrism, they act against social segregations and fight selfishness, making the metropolitan need for solidarity and interest in it visible.

Recognising polycentrism forces us out of the centre/periphery duality. It forces us to think about the governance of the metropolis differently to the mere government of a *larger* city – which risks multiple failures (Gilli and Offner, 2009: 110) – or even considering metropolises to be

Demanding polycentrism means that the peripheries are recognised as territories that provide solutions to metropolitan challenges.

Prevailing economic logics accentuate the socio-spatial fragmentations and constantly create more suburbs that the working classes put up with – rather than choose.

ungovernable (Jouve and Lefèvre, 2004). New forms of governance must be invented. They will vary according to the different political traditions, and will involve remembering that peripheries also have histories (Gilli and Offner, 2009: 131) – shaped by "*making the city*" and the will *to be*. This is governance in which cooperation between *centralities*, the result of the struggles on the periphery for the right to the city, is key to responding to common challenges and helps everyone, but especially those who need it most. It is governance in which cooperation and solidarity for everyone prevails over domination and centralisation.

V. The experience of Grand Paris

In the debate on Grand Paris (specifically, the configuration of a metropolitan governance mechanism), the world of finance advocates "recentralisation" of the metropolis for the sake of economic efficiency and greater attractiveness. Polycentrism has few supporters, as, according to Faburel (2018: 170), it affirms the right of each local government to lean, in its own way, towards autonomy. The requirement for territorial grouping and the urban integration of territorial reforms since the 1960s is in clear contradiction to this idea.

The first ideas the supporters of *centralisation* defended were called Haussmann 1 and Haussmann 2 in reference to Baron Haussmann, who in 1860 ordered the annexation by Paris of the municipalities on its outskirts, ignoring their histories and over 100 years of local democracy. In many of the peripheral municipalities, whether working cities or dormitory cities, the struggles to "make the city" over the entire period of urban growth of the industrial revolution was the result of an alliance between local power and the labour movement the so-called "Red Belt". The local authorities of the peripheries demonstrated a capacity for social innovation, which is why the Paris metropolis is characterised by this multiplicity of spaces for democratic mobilisation.

Deindustrialisation hit these territories and their inhabitants hard, but the existence of a strong local democracy, despite the difficulties, has allowed them to preserve their voice and visibility. When the debate on Grand Paris began in 2001, they were able to participate in it to defend the principles of *solidarity* against the requirements of *competitiveness*. Taking their realities as a starting point, they voiced the social and spatial inequalities they experience in order to reduce them. Some municipalities joined associations to help each other "make the city", building a common project for all their inhabitants within the Paris metropolis. Plaine Commune is an example of this.[5] Its ambition has been to advance the right to the city for the working classes in the face of the tensions caused by neoliberal policies and to participate, with other territorial dynamics, in building a polycentric, supportive and ecologically responsible metropolis. In this sense, Plaine Commune has worked to promote polycentric metropolitan governance that allows the projects of the territories that make up the metropolis to be valued so that none is banished to oblivion and everyone is served according to their needs. The creation of the so-called "Métropole du Grand Paris" is the result of an initial commitment. The debate continues between supporters of *political centralisation* and those that propose cooperation through *polycentric* governability.

Recognising polycentrism forces us out of the centre/periphery duality.

Plaine Commune has worked to promote polycentric metropolitan governance.

5. Association of 450,000 inhabitants established in 2001 that unites nine municipalities located to the north of Paris (Aubervilliers, Epinay-sur-Seine, La Courneuve, L'Île Saint-Denis, Pierrefitte, Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen, Stains and Villetaneuse).

References

Borja, J. *La Ciudad Conquistada*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2003.

Bouba-Olga, O. and Grossetti, M. "La Mythologie CAME (Compétitivité, Attractivité, Métropolisation, Excellence: comment s'en désintoxiquer". *Archives ouvertes*, 23rd November 2018 (online) [Accessed 22 August 2019] https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01724699/document.

Braouezec, P. "Les ambitions du Grand Paris", speech at the seminar "Qu'est-ce qu'une métropole durable". Sarajevo, September 2012.

Bretagnolle, A., Le Goix, R. and Vacchiani-Marcuzzo, C. "Métropolisation et mondialisation". *Dossier Documentation françaises*, no.8082, July–August 2011.

Castells, M. *Luttes urbaines*. Paris: Petite Collection Maspéro, Éditions La Découverte, 1975.

Challenges.fr. "Londres, capital de la pauvreté, selon un nouveau rapport", 2017 (online) [Accessed 09 August 2019] https://www.challenges.fr/monde/europe/londres-capitale-de-la-pauvrete-selon-un-nouveau-rapport_505088.

Davis, M. *Le Pire des Mondes, de l'explosion urbaine au bidonville global*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2006.

Deboulet, A. (coord.), Butin, C. and Demoulin, J. *Métropoles compétitives et horizons de justice spatiale*. CISDPDH, 2018 (online) [Accessed 22 August 2019] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/sites/default/files/METROPOLES-COMPETITIVES-JUSTICE-SPATIALE_CGLU2018.pdf.

Engels, F. *The Housing Question*. Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers, 1995 [1873] (online) [Accessed 21 October 2019] https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_Housing_Question.pdf.

Faburel, G. *Les métropoles barbares: Démondialiser la ville*, désurbaniser la terre. Paris: Le passager Clandestin, 2018.

Gilli, F. and Offner, J-M. *Paris, Métropole hors les murs: Aménager et gouverner un Grand Paris*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2009.

Harvey, D. *Le Capitalisme contre le droit à la ville: Néolibéralisme, urbanisation, résistance*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2011.

Harvey, D. *Villes Rebelles. Du droit à la ville à la révolution urbaine*. Paris: Éditions Buchet Chastel, 2015.

Jouve, B. and Lefèvre, C. (eds.). *Metropole ingouvernable : les villes européennes entre globalisation et décentralisation*. Paris: Elsevier, 2004.

Lefebvre, H. *Le Droit à la ville*. Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1968.

ANTONIO ANIESA

Lefebvre, H. "Quand la ville se perd dans une métamorphose planétaire". *Le Monde diplomatique,* May 1989 (online) [Accessed 22 August 2019] https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1989/05/LEFEBVRE/41710.

Mitchell, D. "Espace public, droits et justice social", in: Gintrac, Cécile; Giroud, Matthieu (eds.). *Villes contestées. Pour une géographie critique de l'urbain*, Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2014, pp. 313–335.

Sassen, S. *La Globalisation. Une sociologie*. Paris: Gallimard, 2009a.

Sassen, S. "Critique de l'État. Territoire, Autorité et droits, de l'époque médiévale à nos jours". Paris: *Le Monde diplomatique* (2009b).

Sassen, S. "L'archipel des villes global". *Revue Sciences Humaines. Grands Dossiers*, No. 17 (*Mondial Villes: les nouveaux lieux de pouvoirs*), December 2009/January–February 2010 (online) [Accessed 22 August 2019] https : //www.scienceshumaines.com/l-archipel-des-villes-globales_fr_24585.html.