

2018



CITY
MUNICIPALITY
COMMONS

REBEL CITIES IN THE
NEOLIBERAL AGE
YAVOR TARINSKI

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Title: City, Municipality, Commons
Subtitle: Rebel Cities in the Neoliberal Age

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Published in 2018 as samizdat
Powered by towardsautonomyblog



Publication type: Digital-Only

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City, Municipality, Commons
Rebel Cities in the Neoliberal Age

by Yavor Tarinski

Introduction

With the rise of cities, a major power shift is occurring this century across the planet in both economic and political terms.

Dimitrios Roussopoulos¹

Nowadays the importance of the city is increasing, not only because of the fact that the majority of the human population is currently living in urban areas, but also because of the global trend of cities exercising growing influence over national and transnational political, economic, social, environmental and other affairs². While the signing of the Westphalia treaty in 1648 signified a period driven by the interests of nation-states, today we are entering into a new one dominated by transnational institutions, multinational corporations and mega-cities.

In the contemporary capitalist system based on unlimited economic growth the city's role is rapidly growing as it undoubtedly is becoming world's GDP champion. This is increasingly evident from the fact that few hundred cities across the planet account for more

¹ Dimitrios Roussopoulos: *The Rise of Cities*, Black Rose Books 2017, p.7

² <https://qz.com/807733/in-the-future-cities-may-finally-solve-problems-that-have-stumped-the-worlds-biggest-nations/>

than half of the global GDP³. In economic terms these sub-national entities can thus be regarded less as a territory but as a space where global flows— capital, information, people, goods, services— crisscross and solidify. Antonio Negri has noted this economization of the urban space, suggesting that cities have become a source of production, just as worked land once was⁴. The city is increasingly becoming the central cog in the global economic machine.

The current trend in rapid urbanization has begun transforming the face of international affairs as well. Cities and local governments are increasingly undertaking mediatory roles in global relations, due to their growing political and economic influence. The creation of transnational coordination bodies like the Global Parliament of Mayors⁵ and the Compact of Mayors⁶ are indicative for the differentiation between the agendas followed by national and subnational authorities. Cities are even formally joining multilateral institutions, initially projected for nation-states, like the World Trade Organization, United Nations, World Tourism Organization etc. Like the city-states of the past, the contemporary urban entities are becoming increasingly independent in international affairs.

The military sphere of raw power is another field in which a shift of positions between the city and the Nation-State could be observed⁷. Contemporary researchers, thinkers and activists, from disciplines ranging from Urban Geography to Political Sciences, tend to agree on the increasing role urban areas have in armed conflicts. The asymmetric powers of conflicting sides have increasingly led military

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielrunde/2015/02/24/urbanization-development-opportunity/#42e7efaa6ca3>

⁴ Antonio Negri: *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, Seven Stories Press 2006. p.35.

⁵ <https://globalparliamentofmayors.org/>

⁶ <https://www.compactofmayors.org/>

⁷ <https://www.icrc.org/en/international-review/war-in-cities>

strategists to take the battlefield to the complex and unpredictable terrain of contemporary mega-cities. Other factors like refugee waves, caused either by war, poverty or climate change, influence additionally this trend. Thus the monopoly of nation-states on military power is being contested by the growing militarization of cities across the globe. This new military urbanism has blurred, as the works of contemporary authors like Mike Davis and Stephen Graham are demonstrating, the lines between armed combatants and civilian citizens, thus often resulting in the brutal crushing of the voices of active citizen dissent and enforcing instead further passive consumerist attitudes.

The current age of urbanization also presents certain challenges before humanity's health, as well as its footprint on the environment⁸. Urban sprawl that requires long commutes by car and less-to-no physical exercise, air and noise pollution, and other factors have resulted in new kinds of diseases and health problems that are affecting urban dwellers. But contemporary mega-cities are also representing potential and real threat to the environment with much more than half of both the global energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the ongoing urbanization. They consume enormous amounts of resources as well as are threatening water supplies with pollution. In short, the future of the natural environment on this planet is directly linked with the future of the cities most of us currently live in.

From the said above we can see the growing importance of the city in modern life. Notions like "cultural capital" and "creative cities" indicate the role urban spaces are undertaking in spheres beyond the ones we have used to take for granted. From here we can agree with Negri that the inhabitant of a metropolis has become the true center

⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/megacities/2011/04/04/the-problem-with-megacities/#6dcd7a5b6f27>

of the world⁹, since the future of the city (and thus of humanity) is in the hands of him and his fellow citizens.

⁹ Op. Cit. 4

City as Public Space

[M]any city centers became dominated by leisure use. It was of course a commercial rather than an anarchic leisure, since larger situationist demands remained marginalized by capitalism – which always seemed likely to be the case, except perhaps for a few heady days in May 1968.

Simon Sadler¹⁰

For thinkers like Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin, the historic emergence of the City is interlinked with the birth of democracy. It produced the notion of citizenry, i.e. a community bonded not by clan or blood-ties, but by political agreement. This urban politics allowed for the creation of public space that enabled citizens to collectively manage their cities which laid the foundations of direct democracy. Not all cities were democratic, in fact most were managed in oligarchic manner, but their foundational logic has strengthened the concept of participatory politics.

The period of Antiquity saw the emergence of the Ancient Athenian polis and the birth of democracy. They both were rooted in the idea of radical political equality between all citizens. This deeply democratic notion allowed the citizenry (up to 30 000 citizens at times) to conceive of history as creation and build the polis around participatory institutions like general assembly (ekklesia), council of delegates (boule) and choosing magistrates by lot (sortition). These processes of self-instituting and the imaginary they simultaneously

¹⁰ Simon Sadler: *The Situationist City*, The MIT Press 1999, p.157

were embodying and nurturing allowed popular creativity to develop to levels unseen until today.

Then, in the Middle Ages (between 9th and 15th century), many Italian cities became a site of wide popular liberation. People found refuge in them and the public space they created there allowed them to throw off the authority of prince, king, or emperor. In their place a system of governance was introduced through interlocking and balanced councils. Large deliberative assemblies, comprising of one hundred, two hundred, or more adult males, elected or chosen by lot, debated and created laws. Executive committees, often consisted by six, eight, or a dozen men, elected for two to six months, put the laws into action. Short terms in office and rules against self-succession made it possible for several hundred or more adult males to participate in government in a few years. The system of balanced and diffused power ensured that no individual or family could control the city. It was a government of balanced power and mutual suspicion.

In 19th century France one of the most significant examples of the right to the city took place in the form of The Paris Commune. Although this urban popular uprising was crushed on May 27th, 1871 by the French state's army, for couple of months the city of Paris became real public space, managed directly by its citizens. The communards, through neighbourhood assemblies, took care of the important local administration. These assemblies were appointing delegates (revocable at any time) to participate in councils, forming confederations, through which they effectively coordinated production and redistribution.

A century later, in 1980, in the South Korean city of Kwanju, the people rose up in the so called Kwanju's people revolt. The preconditions for it were the authoritarian government and the

widespread poverty of this period, while the specific reason was the brutality of paramilitary groups towards protesters. The people of Kwajuku revolted, driving the military forces out of the city. The revolt lasts only three weeks but during this short period, 13 neighbourhood assemblies emerged, giving voice to the local populace. Connecting with one another, these basic institutions of the direct democracy maintained order and organized redistribution in the city. The revolt was crushed by government forces on May 27th – the same date as the fall of the Paris Commune.

In all these and many other cases, like Barcelona of 1936-39, Budapest of 1956, Shanghai of 1967 etc. cities became truly public spaces that emancipated the local populations into active citizenries. In their short live spans, these radical urban experiences offered practical examples of new ways of everyday life and of democratic politics in general that can be used today by social movements not as ready blueprints that should be blindly followed, but as germs that can spark democratic and ecological transformation of our urban environment.

However, a big obstacle for people today to take back their cities is the contemporary societal imaginary, viewing, as Richard Sennett suggests, the public space as “meaningless”¹¹. Sennett points at the nineteenth-century, a period of rapid urbanization and economic growth, during which the outcome of the crisis of public culture, despite several urban eruptions of radical citizen activity, was that people lost a sense of themselves as an active force, as a “public” (Sennett, 1992:261). Sennett suggests that during this period an important role in the process of depriving the public space from meaning was the adoption of more uniform dress and behavior codes, more passive demeanor and less sociability, all of which can

¹¹ Richard Sennett: *The fall of public man*, Knopf 1977

be seen as byproducts of the emerging consumerist culture and logic of representativity of that period. As Peter G. Goheen says: “*The street became the place for illusion rather than exposure to the truth*”¹². In a sense, the public man was supplanted by the spectator who did not so much participate in the public life of the city as he observed it.

In order to overcome this point of view we are in need of new significations, which to give back meaning to the public space. And such can emerge only through practices of collectivities of citizens (i.e. the public), that would have positive and practical effect in the everyday life of society. Such processes already are taking place in the countryside and the village. Because of the crisis, many people in countries like Greece and Spain are leaving the city life behind, returning to the villages, that once their parents and grandparents fled¹³. In the countryside the city youth rediscovers communal ways of life, sharing of common resources, traditional and ecological agricultural practices etc. But for the majority of those, who undertake such steps, the village is an escape route from the uncertainty of the city, a form of escapism rather than part of political project for social change. It neglects the role cities play in our societies and the potential they contain for the creation of one democratic and ecological future.

As for those who remain in the cities, living under conditions of growing precarity, unemployment and stress, the future does not seem so bright, with harsh austerity measures still on the horizon. This discontent is producing uprisings and mass mobilizations in urban areas, ranging from the Istanbul’s Gezi Park, Ferguson’s

¹² Peter G. Goheen: *Public space and the geography of the modern city* in Progress in Human Geography 22,4, 1998, p.482.

¹³ https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/neo-rurals-spain-lost-generation-economic-crash-rurbanization

uprisings against police brutality, the anti-World Cup riots in the Brazilian cities and the Occupy and Indignados movements in the squares of every major city around the World. In all of these cases, in one way or another, the question with urban planning is being posed: can the city square obtain the role of main cell of public deliberation, i.e. simultaneously *agora* (meeting and exchange point) and basic decision-making body; should a global festival of consumerism, such as the World Cup, have the right to reshape urban landscape, regardless of the “human” cost; and who should decide if an urban green space (such as Gezi Park) is to be covered with concrete and transformed completely.

Potential solutions to this loss of meaning should be sought in projects of direct democracy that can once again make the city a truly public space. Or as Henri Lefebvre suggest, to take the “the urban” beyond mere urbanization and toward a non-capitalist society characterized by meaningful engagement among inhabitants embedded in a web of social connections¹⁴.

¹⁴ Journal of Urban Affairs, Vol.36 No. 1, p.151

Libertarian Municipalism

Our teloi, which include a rationally and democratically constituted system of laws—of duties as well as rights—include as well this ability to be citizens, that is to say, to be educated in order to be competent to assume all the obligations of self-government.

Murray Bookchin¹⁵

Concepts like libertarian municipalism, which are essentially direct-democratic, could be of great use in our efforts at regaining our right to the city. I.e. notions that are rooted in the historic clash over power between the municipality and the nation state. Unlike statecraft, predisposed to bureaucratic centralization and hierarchy, cities tend to empower local populaces, creating citizens, actively involved in public affairs. Today however, with cities being submitted to the dominant imaginary significations, thus abandoning their previous role of socializing public space and becoming instead sprawling urban monster, absorbing traditional cultures and producing alienation, new strategies are needed. Libertarian municipalism is among these strategies for reinvention of the city.

It is a political concept, developed initially by libertarian theorists like Murray Bookchin and Janet Biehl, but have since been highly influential among radical political tendencies and have encouraged the practical creation of direct-democratic decision-making bodies, like popular assemblies and councils, in urban neighborhoods and towns. It seeks to potentially create suitable conditions for citizens to be able take back control of their cities.

¹⁵ Murray Bookchin in *Thoughts on Libertarian Municipalism* that originally appeared in *Left Green Perspectives* (Number 41, January 2000).

Distinctive feature of Libertarian Municipalism is its transcendence beyond narrow class analysis as advocated by some traditional ideological trends among Marxists and classical anarchists¹⁶. While not neglecting the worker exploitation taking place at the capitalist workplace, it asks us to challenge all forms of domination within society. I.e. it strives at eliminating the dominance over workers, as well as over women, ethnic minorities, young and old, handicapped, LGBT people and whoever else that are being oppressed.

Libertarian municipalism encourages dual power I.e. situation in which the authority of the state is being challenged by the empowered democratic municipalities¹⁷. And while relatively peaceful coexistence could be expected initially, logically a conflict between the two is expected to emerge sooner or later. Thus, emerges the need for collaboration between such liberated cities.

In this line of thought, Libertarian Municipalism does not necessarily seek for momentarily and violent revolution. Instead it focuses on the educational qualities of the creation and spread of truly public space and time through the construction of direct-democratic citizenry from bottom-to-top. Libertarian Municipalism views the practical installation of participatory institutions like the neighborhood assembly and the municipal council as protentional educational tools for the nurturing of popular culture of active citizenship.

Historically speaking, independent municipalities tend to join forces into confederal alliances, not only for protection from common enemies, but also for sharing resources and knowledge. Social ecologists call this organizational model democratic confederalism and it is logically interlinked with the strategy of libertarian municipalism. Its target is to lay the foundations of one truly emancipated society. Instead of centralized state apparatus

¹⁶ Murray Bookchin: *The Next Revolution*, Verso 2015, p.34

¹⁷ Murray Bookchin: *The Next Revolution*, Verso 2015, p.73

governing the populace, it proposes the direct democracy of local decision-making bodies for self-management, networking with one another through regional confederations, thus rendering the state obsolete.

A version of it is currently being built in the Middle East by the communities of Rojava. There the Kurdish liberation movement, after radical change in its political orientation, began establishing local, but interlinked, participatory decision-making bodies, independent from the official State authorities. This strategy demonstrated its strength in the period that followed the Arab Spring, when after the regime lost its control of the area, this new confederacy of democratic structures managed to get the local populations back on their feet, improve their living conditions and defend them from the armed Jihadist gangs that terrorized the region.

The synthesis between libertarian municipalism and democratic confederalism attempts at permanent social revolution. It aims at radicalizing and emancipating one city after another through local municipal platforms and then connecting these rebel cities through confederal coordinational bodies. In this way the current functions of state and private/capitalist entities will be undertaken by the emancipated demos.

Recently, with the rise of various municipal electoral platforms across Europe and abroad, there has been certain trend in overlapping libertarian municipalism with the citizen involvement in local elections. But while the initial developers of the project gave to municipal electorals certain role within it, they in no way saw it as main tool. Instead Bookchin and his followers sought in local elections nothing but another tool for the advancement of the ideas of direct democracy¹⁸. The municipal level, they thought, was not as

¹⁸ Murray Bookchin: *The Next Revolution*, Verso 2015, p.35

centralized as the national one, and thus much more vulnerable to pressure and control by social movements.

Commons and Direct Democracy

Commoning is a radical concept because it insists upon the active, knowing participation of people in shaping their own lives and meeting their own needs.

David Bollier and Silke Helfrich¹⁹

The commons can most generally be defined as something on which people are dependent on for their well-being and livelihood. From this point of view most of our surrounding can be defined as such. From the air we breathe, through the water we drink and use to wash ourselves with, to energy, education, transportation and much, much more.

In this line of thought it is not hard for us to imagine the city through the lens of the commons. As Dr. Jose Ramos suggest, *we can think of our whole city as relational processes of commoning, where citizens recognize and enact commons through consciousness and action.*²⁰ For him the health of a city is indistinguishable from the health of his inhabitants, its resilience and empowerment – from those of its citizens and so on. We can base this logic on the understanding, expressed from thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, for whom every society produces its own space²¹.

The unification of the present three notions – those of the city, the municipality and the commons – are presenting us with a potential

¹⁹ David Bollier & Silke Helfrich: *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, Levellers Press 2015, Overture

²⁰ <https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/city-commons-policy-reader/2016/07/22>

²¹ Henri Lefebvre: *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991, p. 26.

path towards the transcendence of capitalism and the State. They suggest that the meaning of the urban commons goes much deeper than simple usage and accessibility. It is not their access that differentiates them from the various contemporary enclosed forms of private or statist property. It is their essence—that they are of common interest for the wider community, which on its part is collectively playing the role of steward of them.

In her groundbreaking work, *Governing the Commons*, Nobel Prize recipient Elinor Ostrom's focus is directed towards, as the very title suggests, to the way they are being managed. Conducting her research in many countries around the world, she discovered how local communities managed to prevent supposed tragedies of their common-pool resources through direct-democratic processes.

David Harvey, among other thinkers, in his influential work *Rebel Cities*, directs this logic towards the contemporary urban terrains. And indeed, today it is of crucial importance to investigate how the democratic management of commons, witnessed by Ostrom in small scale communities around the world, could be applied to our contemporary cities, inhabited by thousands and sometimes even by millions.

One such case is the development of the water cooperatives in cities all around the world, and especially in places like Cochabamba, Bolivia, these forms have proven quite successful comparing to private and statist entities. Since water is of indisputable common interest, the introduction of cooperative management of it has allowed for this interest to take more physical dimensions. Not only the people will have free access to the invaluable resource, but they will take its destiny in their own hands — making it a real commons.

Another example is the process of participatory budgeting, championed by the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre and today spreading in numerous cities across the globe like Paris, France. It is the physical expression of the idea of urban commoning. Participatory budgeting allows citizens to directly allocate where their municipal budget should go through deliberative decision-making bodies. Despite certain contradictions, it nonetheless offers an important practical experience of successful urban commoning with decades-long history.

In the current internet age too attempts at democratic management of the digital commons in the urban setting are being made. The idea for creation of platform co-ops and collective management of server farms is trying to tackle the ongoing economization. Of course we must bear in mind that these proposals are just small part of the contemporary commons landscape.

We should note here, that if we conceive of the commons only as resources that should be accessible to all members of society, then we must seriously think what would that potentially indicate. If this access is being mediated by extra-social structure like the state, then we will be dependent on it and predisposed to blackmail. If this leviathanish organization has the final say over them, then we speak of just different form of private property. If it is society to exercise real right over the commons, then it should have to directly manage them, without the intermediacy of third parties, no matter how “progressive” or “enlightened”.

With this said we should add that to think of the commons solely in terms of property is economistic and essentially, part of the capitalist imaginary. Often what we call commons is in practice part of the planetary ecosystem, invaluable for our existence as well as for that

of nature itself. Thus we should conceive of our relation with them as stewardship. That is, we manage them in democratic and sustainable manner that will allow for their regeneration and will not harm the environment. This implies also processes of conscious self-limitation, achieved through democratic deliberation, as many communities of commoners have demonstrated in practice.

This is radically different imaginary from the present one, which places at its core the question of politics, i.e. who decides. In the Ancient city of Athens people called commons (*koina*) all the affairs that were of common concern to all the community and thus everyone had the right to intervene in their management. This was the culture of direct democracy, unlike today's system, which has been telling us that we can participate only as consumers and voters.

Emancipatory Urban Design

The city is not merely a repository of pleasures. It is the stage on which we fight our battles, where we act out the drama of our own lives. It can enhance or corrode our ability to cope with everyday challenges. It can steal our autonomy or give us the freedom to thrive.

Charles Montgomery²²

The status quo reproduces itself on many fronts. The representative politics at the heart of it are designed to maintain the same patterns of thinking, no matter what the final electoral result is. The same goes for the capitalist economic relations, the bureaucracy etc. The very cities, in which nowadays most of humanity lives are designed according to the dominant values and perceptions. They are dispersed; their inhabitants live in isolated private condominiums, distanced away from workplaces and market districts, getting around alone in their private cars. This model of urban sprawling is rapidly spreading all over the world²³. The cities are organized in such ways that human contact is greatly reduced. Thus, achieving social change in more participatory and collaborative direction, would be an overwhelmingly difficult task if we don't have this in our mind.

For society's organization to be reorganized on the basis of direct democracy, amongst the many preconditions that seem to be required, is the breaking of alienation and establishment of communitarian relationships. A city that would encourage and

²² Charles Montgomery: *Happy City*, Penguin Books 2015, p.36

²³ <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/environment/cities/global-urban-expansion-impact-biodiversity-carbon-2030>

develop community feeling would represent a mixture of housing, public, workplace, shopping, green and other spaces, all of which will be within walking distance or reachable by public transportation, in contrast with the modern mainstream way of urban design, based on positioning of fixed zones across vast distances.

A mixed architecture consisting of medium-sized housing cooperatives, with adjoined gardens, within a walking distance from schools, public squares, markets and green spaces will allow for the experience of random interactions between neighbors. The walking element could build feeling of belonging to the city, with citizens developing strong links with their local, social and urban environment. It will also, as author Jay Walljasper notes²⁴, contribute to greater economic equality by allowing everyone the right to freely move across the city, without the need of car.

The shift towards walkable cities would imply the radical rethinking and remaking of roads and streets, today designed mainly as high-speed arteries connecting housing districts with office areas, encouraging driving over walking. As Donald Appleyard's famous 1972 study demonstrates²⁵, the heavier the car traffic on a street is, the fewer are the walkers and the everyday communal experiences. This, in addition to the obvious effects on human health (leading to obesity, heart diseases etc.), contributes to the already high levels of alienation in urban areas.

²⁴ <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/10/23/good-place-everyone-walk>

²⁵ Donald Appleyard and Mark Lintell: *The environmental quality of streets (1972): the resident's view point* in *Journal of the American Planning Association*. pp.84-101

An approach that could alter this alienating effect, encouraging instead people to walk on the streets and potentially to produce community feeling is the narrowing of streets in urban areas, expansion of pedestrian spaces, introduction of wider bicycle alleys etc. As the city planner and author Jeff Speck explains²⁶, people drive faster when they have less fear of veering off track, so wider lanes invite higher speeds. This, in mixture with vast network of free urban public transportation, will allow for daily social interactions on them by pedestrians and passengers. The daily social experiences like noddings, smiles and random chatting with co-citizens could potentially make us feel more comfortable on our streets.

This in turn would bring with it other positive effects as well, like drastic reduction of the health problems mentioned earlier, but also reduction of car speed, responsible for the death of huge numbers of people around the world, as well as reduction of the air pollution of the contemporary private car-dominated metropolises.

Green spaces are another key aspect of the urban environment. According to Bob Lalasz, they tend to make people happier²⁷. Furthermore, green spaces tend to bring people closer together, if planned and designed in appropriate manner²⁸. Thus in a community-promoting urban project, nature should be essential part of the urban landscape. The gardens, part of housing cooperatives, will allow for the experience of gardening time by neighbours, bonding them together. It will also potentially encourage the development of

²⁶ <https://www.citylab.com/design/2014/10/why-12-foot-traffic-lanes-are-disastrous-for-safety-and-must-be-replaced-now/381117/>

²⁷ <https://blog.nature.org/science/2015/05/22/science-nature-emotion-affect-feel-better/>

²⁸ Jane Jacobs: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vintage Books 1992, pp89-111

communal/solidarity economy by neighbours producing their own food and exchanging or sharing it with other urban gardeners.

In addition, parks and public gardens should be shuffled across the mixed urban architecture. There is a certain trend in modern metropolitan cities for large scale parks to be zoned away from housing districts and office areas, making human interaction with nature a rare opportunity. Contrary to that logic, the mixed city, as described here, could comprise green spaces located in various locations across the city. As Charles Montgomery suggests²⁹, this does not exclude the existence of large scale parks, but the urban green space will not be limited to them. This will imply that people will have the opportunity to get in contact with tiny gardens and parks on their way to work for example, as well as to experience the feeling of being “into the wild” by entering the huge local parks.

Public squares play a key role in a city that encourages communitarian culture and citizenry, since they act as spaces for social interactions as well as forums for expression of civic opinions. Thus they should be made freely available for popular interventions, unlike today, where bureaucrats decide who, when and for what reason they should be used.

However, we also hear critiques about the over-crowdedness of modern cities, leading to further alienation and withdrawal into passivity. If this is true, should we abandon city life altogether and return to village life? According to psychologist Andrew Baum’s study³⁰, the feeling of over-crowdedness is being fed by urban design that does not allow people to control the intensity of spontaneous

²⁹ Charles Montgomery: *Happy City*, Penguin Books 2013, p.110

³⁰ Stuar Valins and Andrew Baum: *Residential Group Size, Social Interaction, and Crowding in Environment and Behavior*, 1973

social interactions. Baum compared the behavior of residents of two very different college dormitories. He concluded that students whose environment was allowing them to control their social interactions experienced less stress and built more friendships than students who lived along long and crowded corridors.

Therefore an answer to the problem of “over-crowdedness” could be found in the creation of semi-public/communal spaces, which represent a middle ground between the private and the public. This would imply the abandonment of the gigantic housing projects in which large numbers of people live together (like the socialist-era gigantic worker “barracks”), never feeling quite alone. Instead, a space could be given to medium-sized housing cooperatives with common spaces in disposal of all the neighbors. In this way, three layers of social spheres would be created – private, communal and public – allowing citizens to regulate their social interaction, thus giving them sense of comfort and encouraging egalitarianism.

Transcending of Capitalism and the State

The right to the city is a far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.

David Harvey³¹

During last years the city has emerged as potential contender to the nation-state in a global wave that can be characterized as “rebellion of the municipal”. The radical geographer David Harvey has even argued that ‘rebel cities’ will become a preferred site for revolutionary movements³². This new rebellious municipalist trend bears heavily on the theoretical influence of the work of libertarian thinker Murray Bookchin who, like the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, returned to the forgotten ancient Athenian concept of the *Polis* as credible source for solutions to the ills of our contemporary society. He attempted with great success at revealing the revolutionary essence of this notion and its potentialities for our times. To parliamentary oligarchy, tribal nationalism and capitalist relations, Bookchin proposed direct-democratic confederations of libertarian municipalities where citizens participate directly in local assemblies and elect revocable delegates to regional councils. In the city and its historic rivalry with the State, he saw a possible public space where civic culture can break domination in all its forms.

This legacy seems, more than ever, abreast with our time. While large cities worldwide are increasingly following their own agendas that often go against State policies, like the city of London and its

³¹ David Harvey: *The right to the city* in *New Left Review* Vol.53 (September–October 2008)

³² David Harvey: *Rebel Cities*, Verso Books 2012, p.117

resistance to Britain's leave of the EU (the so-called 'Brexit')³³, a new generation of municipal platforms is emerging, boosted by the deepening of the crisis of representation. Most of them are partially influenced by the above-mentioned theoretical framework, and have sprung in different parts of the world, but mainly in Europe. In Spain such projects govern most major cities like Barcelona and Madrid³⁴. These platforms are trying to reverse the austerity measures that are being enforced by the State, international technocratic institutions and transnational agreements, remunicipalize basic public services, introduce participatory decision-making bodies on local level, feminize politics, challenge governmental anti-migrant policies etc. Some of these 'rebel cities' have begun connecting with each other, thus multiplying and strengthening their voices.

In the US also local municipalities have reached to conflict with the central government's policies. Close to 250 cities across the country have pledged to adopt, honor and uphold the commitments to the goals set by the Paris Agreements after the announcement of president Trump's plans to break up with the latter³⁵. But while the motivations of some of these local administrations remain questionable due to their possible connections with the main electoral opponents to the contemporary government, municipal platforms are emerging in the US as well, like the initiative *Olympia for All*³⁶ that tries to give more participatory and ecological characteristics to the municipality of Olympia, Washington (USA).

³³ <http://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/news/items/hss/178917.html>

³⁴ <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/rebel-cities-the-citizen-platforms-in-power/>

³⁵ https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimdalyrmypleii/us-states-and-cities-react-to-paris-withdrawal?utm_term=.xmlReY3O3#.lgnX98G2G

³⁶ <http://new-compass.net/articles/olympia-all>

Of course there are problems with these practices. Most of these municipal projects attempt at trying to radicalize cities through the mechanisms of local bureaucracies that resemble to a large degree the state apparatus. This fact raises the question of how far this “radicalization” can go. Why the installation of militants from social movements in the hierarchical municipal administration should succeed, if it failed so disastrously on national level several times during the revolutionary experiences of the last two centuries.

We should consider the difficulty of balancing between city bureaucracy and social movements. It is well known that especially in Europe, these municipal platforms (most notably like Barcelona en Comu) emerged from the so called “movement of the squares” that attempted redefining and reclaiming more authentic notion of democracy. But if the essence of the real, direct democracy is the abolition of bureaucratic fragmentation of everyday life, can it then be advanced with bureaucratic means such as political representation and expertism? In the end, as the old maxim goes, the means determine the goal and the direction. You cannot learn democracy if you do not practice it.

However, all these problematics cannot make us abandon the city as potential locus for making politics beyond statecraft, but provoke us to rethink it as truly public space that is constantly being recreated by its citizens and that goes beyond narrow electoralism. It places questions of crucial importance like how local politicians can be turned into municipal delegates, that serve the neighbourhood assemblies and that are constantly revocable by those that have elected them. In more general terms, the question they pose is how city’s administration to be integrated into the democratic vision, forwarded in practice, by “the squares”. Answers to these and many more problematics will not come easy, but should be developed patiently in deliberative manner “from below”, if we want to avoid

this new municipalist revolt to drift away from its acclaimed democratic goals and descend into localized forms of representative oligarchy with friendlier face.

One contemporary case that seems to be going in the right direction, although in completely different socio-historic context from ours, is the democratic autonomy that is currently being built in Rojava. The base of the confederal system that nowadays functions in this part of the war-torn Middle East was set through strategy that resembles to a large degree the principles of libertarian municipalism, as noted earlier in this text. And while structures that resemble to a certain extent representative democracy coexist with participatory grassroots institutions there, militants from the TEV-DEM movement³⁷ together with activists from the local communities constantly search for ways to make sure that power in their society flows from the bottom to the top. And their success is quite impressive, managing to establish one of the most politically inclusive systems worldwide.

The authoritarian nature of the contemporary system requires anti-authoritarian alternative paradigm if it is to be successfully challenged. While many have argued that the current rise in authoritarianism and technocracy is nothing but a temporary phase in the liberal oligarchic rule, others, like Walter Benjamin, have argued that the “state of exception” in which we live is in fact not the exception but the rule. Electoral victories by far-right candidates and fascist parties are not some sort of systemic breakdown but continuation of traditional hierarchical rule by other means. Thus it is up to all of us, of those “below”, to bring about a real exception in the tradition of heteronomy and follow a democratic tradition

³⁷ TEV-DEM (or *Movement for Democratic Society*) is an alliance of local radical parties and social movements in Northern Syria.

instead by radically breaking up with the domination of human over human and of humanity over nature.

The way through which this could be achieved, logically cannot circulate around the ballot box, either on national or local level, but to be focused on the self-organization and self-institution of society itself. This would imply communities organizing independently from established bureaucracies and determining themselves their agendas. Movements of urban commoners and libertarian municipalists should join forces, as their paradigms have the potential to transform our cities along democratic and ecological lines.

We already saw in the last decade that the popular resistances in urban areas have adopted an anti-authoritarian approach with democratic characteristics. Vanguardist structures like parties and syndicates, once dominant among social movements, have nowadays been abandoned and replaced by open participatory institutions. Demonstrations are increasingly turning into reclamation of public spaces and commons. Thus we can speak of general social attempts at redefining the right to the city.

The role of social movements in these processes would be not to lead but to nurture these direct-democratic traits that stem from our very societies. Among the main questions for them should be how to manage to successfully locate and maintain the grassroots institutions that are emerging in public squares and city neighborhoods in the short eruptions of civil disagreement with enforced policies “from above”. And how their character could be transformed from purely symbolic to effective and decision-making. This also puts forward the need of regional and even transnational connectedness between such dispersed local grassroots institutions for them to be able to function sustainably in the face of state and capitalist hostility. For such germs of genuine direct democracy we

could also look beyond the contemporary Western world, in cities like Cochabamba (Bolivia)³⁸ and Porto Alegre (Brazil)³⁹, and in the radical urban tradition that goes as far as the ancient Athenian *Polis*.

³⁸ Where after the so called “Water Wars” (from December 1999 to April 2000) hundreds of water cooperatives were established by local communities that allowed them to directly manage the invaluable blue substance.

³⁹ The citizens of Porto Alegre determine their city’s budget through a process of democratic deliberation and decision-making since 1989.

Conclusion

A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away. It is waiting like the cake is waiting when there's butter, milk, flour and sugar. This is the realm of freedom.

Henri Lefebvre⁴⁰

As Castoriadis have suggested, we are at a crossroad in the roads of history⁴¹. Some of the more visible paths will keep us within heteronomy, in worlds dominated by the barbarism of international agreements and technocratic institutions, State apparatuses and nationalist cannibalism. Although the characteristics of each one of them may differ, their base remains essentially the same: elites and predetermined truths dominating society and nature. Humanity have been living within this framework during most of its recent history and the symptoms are painfully familiar to us all: loss of meaning, conformism, apathy, irresponsibility, the tightening grip of unlimited economic growth, pseudorational pseudomastery, consumption for the sake of consumption, technoscience that strengthens the domination of capitalist imaginary etc.

There is however another road that is not that visible, but always existent. Unlike the above mentioned directions that are being determined by extra-social sources, this one has to be opened and laid through the political practice of all citizens and their will for freedom. It requires the abolition of bureaucratic fragmentation of everyday life, which is the essence of the State, reclamation of the

⁴⁰ Rosemary Wakeman: *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement*, The University of Chicago Press 2016, p.296

⁴¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*, unauthorized translation 2005, p.146

public space, the commons and the *Polis*, reawakening of the creative imaginary and re-articulation of the project of Autonomy. But it is a matter of social and individual political choice which road our societies will take and the main arena where the final choice will have to be taken will most probably be the city.

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Nowadays the importance of the city is increasing, not only because of the fact that the majority of the human population is currently living in urban areas, but also because of the global trend of cities exercising growing influence over not only national, but also over transnational political, economic, social, environmental and other affairs. We are entering into a new period, dominated by transnational institutions, multinational corporations and mega-cities.

Citizens are becoming aware of the influence their cities have over humanity as a whole and increasing number of social movements places the *Right to the City* at the top of their agenda. It is up to them if the urban space will once again become truly public, or it will continue degrading into sprawling engine for capitalist growth.

