

## REASON, CAPITAL AND URBAN SPACE

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### ABSTRACT

This work deals with the perception of urban space in the framework of globalisation and the withdrawal of the public sphere in the last decades of the XX century. The appearance of a new “market oriented reason” has changed dramatically the way public urban policy is discussed and carried out, with dramatic consequences to urban space. It is not only “form” that has changed, but also the whole perception of the role and the function of urban space. Urban space is the space of ideological constructions that hide its true identity. These ideological constructions are based on discourses full of “gaps”. If these “gaps” were to be filled, the ideological discourse that sustains the commoditisation of space would crumble.

Because of this commoditisation, public policies have shifted to a more pragmatic and market oriented course. In order to legitimise this process, a new discourse of public management has seen the day.

**Keywords:** capital, urban space.

### THE APPEARANCE OF A NEW REASON

In this text, we put forward some considerations on the perception of urban space in the framework of a new phase in capitalist accumulation (globalisation) and the withdrawal of the public sphere in the last decades of the XX century.

We also develop a critique on how urban problems have been approached and studied in the last decade, in the light of a “new reason” that originates from the reposition of market values (neo liberalism), the birth of a “post-modern thought” and the general acceleration of socio-economic phenomena, generally branded as globalisation.

Reasons for the withdrawal of the public sphere are many and complex. It would be impossible to understand the phenomenon without trying to comprehend the constitution of the public sphere and the nature of State in a world dominated by new flexible modes of production, the growing power of Trans-National Corporations (TNCs: e.g. Ford, Unilever, MacDonald’s), the persistent cross border movements of speculative capital and the technologic-informational revolution.

Nevertheless, we can trace the origin of contemporary urban and spatial theories to the resurgence of a “new reason”, which we choose to call “instrumental reason”. In

other words, most of what has been said and written about urban space, urban renewal and urban management in the last decade or so, is based on a reason that is instrumental by the necessities of capitalist accumulation. This trend is apparent in issues like the “Minimum State”, “Local Governance”, “Local Actors Legitimacy”, and “Strategic Planning”. It also constitutes the base for legitimacy of partnerships between public and private sectors at the local level.

### THE REIFICATION OF SPACE

The partnerships between public and private sectors could only be justified in the context of the social contract proposed by Hobbes and Rousseau. However, they are not so easily explained under the critique of the social contract made by Hegel and carried out by Marx, among others. The latter has made a seminal contribution to the unveiling of ideological constructions based on the social contract proposed by Hobbes. Marx considered the modern State to be the institution that, above all others, has the task to ensure and preserve exploitation and class domination (Bottomore, 1988).

For orthodox Marxist thinkers, the state is the institution of organised violence that is used by the ruling class of a country to maintain the conditions of its rule. Thus, it is only in a society that is divided between hostile social classes that the state exists.

Despite Marx formulations and subsequent elaboration of his ideas by an endless string of theorists, there is still a great debate about the true role of the State in modern society. Most thinkers of the Marxist current would agree, however, that the Western capitalist democratic State is largely based on ideological assumptions that operate in order to ensure the domination of the ruling classes over the rest of society.

This has been the hidden driving force of capitalist societies for centuries. Yet, there is a new phenomenon at hand: the appearance of an instrumental reason in the contemporary arena. This has produced, among other things, a general political disengagement and the internal corrosion of the equalitarian social utopias that have dominated modern Western thought since before the French revolution (Harvey, 1989). This has had immediate impacts of various fields of knowledge, including those related to urban management and design.

In a few words, this process happened through the internal corrosion of the sustaining nucleus of the idea of equality and social justice, through the decay of equalitarian utopias and the desertion of the welfare state ideas, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the chute of the Soviet Union (1991). At present, the various modes of structuralism\_ Marxism and Keynesianism\_ are being denied. Concomitantly, the fundamentals of the Welfare State are being demolished and a new edition of XIX century *laissez-faire*, under the name of Globalisation, is being built (Singer, 1999).

Within this framework, where liberalisation of the economy goes hand in hand with blind belief in market infallibility and technical development, the comeback of some irrational categories in politics and planning is remarkable.

Contemporary capitalist society does not operate under concrete materiality of production. In other words, contemporary capitalism does not rely on labour and the product of work, but on the unforeseeable game of rapid dislocations of speculative funds and the fragmentation and dispersion of production around the world (Products are designed, assembled and sold in different countries, e.g. Sony products have

different components produced in various countries. These components are shipped to yet another country where they are assembled. Sometimes yet another country is in charge of trading these products). Therefore, the point of reference is no longer labour (understood as both labour force and labour crystallised in products), but consumption (the commodity fetishism) (Chauí, 1996).

As a consequence, there is a rejection of ethics and humanist values as valid parameters for decision-making. There is also an increasing use of technical categories and esthetics as grounds for the elaboration of public policies for the city.

In former times, blind belief in science dominated the imaginary and ideological constructions that have justified violence perpetrated in the name of Western Civilization and its pretense superiority. Today, the world of appearances and simulacrum takes the place of things themselves, displacing the center of thought and judgment about reality. This has serious epistemological consequences and affects the elaboration of a serious critique on contemporary urban phenomena.

“Things” are replaced by “products”. Urban projects are contaminated by the commodity fetishism and become appearance without substance and pure marketing.

## **THE AESTHETISATION OF SPACE**

Aesthetics plays a major role in an increasingly spectacularization of urban form. Appearance and pure spectacular form take precedence over discussions about the real material substance of public space and the social meaning of public actions in the city. An artificial consensus is created. This social consensus has little to do with the real material living conditions of numerous destitute citizens. These citizens are seen as “excluded” from the main socio-economic streams and a nuisance for the development of cities in a world economy. Competition for the attraction of foreign direct investment through strategic planning generally does not contemplate the inclusion of excluded populations.

For J. Galard (1999), reality becomes increasingly mediated by aesthetics. The generalization of aesthetics as the ground for judgment and analysis has generated, on the one hand, a weakening of critical judgment. This weakening has affected politics and the decision-making process, leading administrators and relevant actors to choose for programs that are mostly based on the spectacularization of form as a tool for attracting investment.

On the other hand, the triumph of aesthetics over reality is clearly advantageous for market forces. It includes the commodity fetishism that leads to the programmed obsolescence of products, but also the precocious obsolescence of spaces and buildings. Space is commoditized and transformed into pure form, without any social meaning. In other words, space becomes an instrument for profit, leaving aside its social functions. In fact, under the light of pure aesthetics, social constructions appear inappropriate to explain space.

In short, it is increasingly more accepted that space produces society, as opposed to the idea that space is socially produced.

This instrumentalization of space through formalist discourses (based on aesthetic values) results, among other things, in public policies that aim at restoring "public space", not the public sphere as such.

For Deutsche (1996), spatial forms are, above all, "materialized social structures". As seen through the lenses of function, the spatial order appears to be controlled by natural laws, either mechanic or organic. Space is recognized as a social product only when it complies with the so-called aggregate individual necessities (Deutsche, 1996).

For Deutsche, when space is separated from its social production, it is swallowed by the commodity fetishism and experiments a transformation by inversion: when space is represented as an independent object, it seems to exert control over the very people who produce and use it.

Therefore, neutralized space presents itself as politically neuter or as mere utilitarian space. For Deutsche, the notion that the city "speaks for itself" hides the identity of those whose speak through the city (Deutsche, 1996).

## THE NEUTRALIZATION OF SPACE

Santos (1993) sees rationality in space, but this rationality only arises from the intentionality on the choice of the objects that compose it. However, the intentionality on the choice of objects can only be operated by social players who are able to act rationally.

This reduction of space to a mere mathematical construction is issued from a general instrumentalisation of reason as a tool for the dominant ideology. In other words, reason is made instrumental in order to make the understanding of reality (and the action derived from this understanding) more and more mediated by indexes, numbers and values that can be isolated and played with, in detriment of comprehensive analysis of reality.

Quantitative analytical methods can be very easily manipulated and used by the so-called hegemonic powers. For Santos (1993), this creates ideal conditions for the intensification of profits, but also ideal conditions for the alienation of citizens. In the spaces of rationality created by hegemonic forces, market becomes "tyrannical" and the State has a tendency to become "powerless". However, the State "lack of power" may be interpreted as a new ideological construction, since observation of recent urban phenomena tell us that the State continues to be a powerful ally of the hegemonic forces (market), helping it to create spaces where capital dwells without constraints.

Simultaneously, spectacularisation and extreme visibility of public actions of a nature contributes to the legitimacy of local administrations and the maintenance of individual in power (in the terms employed by Chomsky, for whom publicity strategies are fundamental for the building up of political legitimacy and the perpetuation of political power in modern societies).

The new phase of the capitalist accumulation is largely based on entrepreneurial strategies of the flexible accumulation. These also include the new informational technologies, the flexibilization of labor regulation and general lack of solidarity among different social groups. These trends are accompanied

by the rapid decline of the public realm (Habermas, 1984; Sennett, 1999).

The decline of the public realm, as indicated by Sennett (1977), signifies a decline of humanism itself and solidarity as a valid parameter for social relations. The parameters en vogue are competitively and pragmatism. Ultimately, when reason is anchored on market rules, reason itself fades in relation to the internal logic of market. Reason is then replaced by "reason on action", or pragmatic reason, that justifies itself through the same ideological constructions that secure the legitimacy of the rule of the dominant classes. As previously indicated, such pragmatic reason legitimizes itself through publicity and spectacularisation.

Therefore, urban space is simultaneously a tool for these strategies and the result of them. Urban space is then assessed and understood through the filters of functionality (the well managed city) or its plasticity (the beautiful city), without taking into account the social frictions that are true constituents of urban space. On the contrary, sterilized urban space is a tool for development and progress, without taking into account whose progress and whose development.

For Deutsche, the ideology of function overshadows the conflictive manner through which cities are used and defined in practice, obscuring the very existence of the groups who contradict the dominant uses of space (Deutsche, 1996). Deutsche quotes Ledrut in order to define the city as a product of social practices, in opposition to the technocratic view of the city as a product of specialists. The city, Ledrut insists, is not a spatial frame external to its users, but is produced by them.

Deutsche points out that, although Ledrut's formulations may appear disappointingly simple, they have profound implications. Ledrut not only explicitly recognizes the participation of different social groups in the production of urban space. He also argues against a concept of space that is imposed by public institutions and big corporations, who are guided by the necessity of profit and legitimated by concepts like efficiency and beauty.

Such assertions coincide with the process of aesthetization of reality described by Galard and the neutralization of space described by Deutsche. The ideas derived from the "beautiful city" and the "efficient city" are the pillars for strategic planning and large urban interventions.

### THE "RESCUE" OF PUBLIC SPACE

The instrumentalization of urban space is in the root of another fiction: the "rescue" of public space.

In the origin of the obsession for the public space is the will for the re-establishment of the sociability lost in modern metropolises. For Arantes (1999), this process has a strong ideological bias, which aims at filling up the void left by the very ruin of public space itself. Here, "public space" is a simple image of marketing, scenery of a social life that has ceased to exist. Arantes quotes Jeudy to explain that such construction is merely a managerial cenography of the city, something like the theatre of daily life, where the history of the city is no more than the aesthetics of memory, or, in other words, a succession of representative tableaux of daily life (Arantes, 1999).

Those who studied the city as a pregnant place believed in public space as space of social interaction. However, this can only take place over an imposed image of the city. Social cohesion in public space is artificially created through the cooptation of citizens to an idealized image of the city and society. More than anywhere, the correlation of the Greek word *nómos* meaning both city *and* society is perfect.

According to contemporary philosophers, the "new public life" would take place through the metamorphosis in urban practice and theory. On the other hand, many other philosophers of the Marxist tradition disagree. For them, such new public life would be nothing but "urban decoration", as there is evidence of new social separation and ghettoization in the new city of flexible production and accumulation.

Here is the point where the coincidence between public sphere and public opinion appears more clearly as a construction full

of gaps. It gives place to the cultural industry, publicity and manipulation of public opinion.

Therefore, in the root for the rescue of public space, there is an ideological construction that celebrates public space, but does not allow any action to be taken in order to rescue the public sphere itself. It is revealing that big urban projects in course all over the world (Berlin, Paris, London, among others) are only made possible through partnerships between the public and the private sector. The private actors are keen on demanding that their brands and logos appear with preeminence in the new spectacular and ultra mediated public space, where those not pertaining to the privileged classes are kept at a safe distance.

For Kurz (1996), “modern irrationalism” does not manifest itself only through fanatic religious movements, but also through the rational façade of trendy political ideas and scientific knowledge. In this way, the ideas contained (and hidden) in the concept of governance (another blurry concept that is a very good tool for political discourse), can be identified as mere instruments for the concealment of conflicts, leading global cities to an implausible “happy-end” amidst the urban social barbarism that takes place in most big cities, both in developed and developing countries.

There is indeed a distortion of thought: the means justify themselves, because society (and the city) is thought the filter of market oriented decisions and choices. Kurz calls this phenomenon the “social biologization”.

### GOVERNANCE AS IDEOLOGICAL TOOL

Governance is a recurring term both in the media and in the academic world. The word itself is not a new one, but its meaning is being constantly refined by institutions and thinkers. For many of them, it conveys a “process” and a field for political action, rather than a fixed concept in the field of public administration: governance presupposes a relation of “positive tension” between institutionalised government, civil

society (represented by old and new civil institutions, including NGOs) and enterprises (the so-called “private sector”). The general aim of this “positive tension” is to create conditions that will trigger the optimisation of public administration, general welfare and social justice, through better interaction of the three main players mentioned above in the decision-making processes which rule society.

The fundamentals of the concept of governance are based on equilibrium among different social actors (State, Private Sector, Civil Society). In the formulation of the concept, those actors appear at the same level of importance and strength, working together for the realization of common welfare. Such ideal conditions do not correspond to the truth of facts. Different actors have very different weight in decision-making processes and TNCs are increasingly more powerful in deciding where and when cities and regions will get investment and jobs. International organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are more powerful than ever in deciding which countries will get loans and which projects inside the city will be funded, whereas the public sector (not to mention civil society) is a mere spectator for decisions taken elsewhere. The strength of “public opinion” is relative and, as we tried to explain here, very much influenced by ideological constructions. The result is the creation of false consensus among actors who are absolutely different in their capacity of decision making and acting, not to mention their divergent objectives and goals.

“Governance” and “Strategic Planning” are very blurry ideas that appear as sub products of instrumental reason\_ a sort of “market oriented reason” \_ reinforcing the constructions of the dominant ideology.

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