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BOOKS REVIEW

Barile, A., Raffini, L., Alteri, L. (2019), *Il tramonto della città. La metropoli globale tra nuovi modelli produttivi e crisi della cittadinanza* [The fading city. The global metropolis between new productive models and the citizenship crisis], Roma, DeriveApprodi.

Tommaso Frangioni

University of Torino

The city is the locus of a consistent part of sociological research, it is the background where the analysis of the most varied objects is developed and, at the same time, it constitutes one of the most challenging scientific objects to build and explain. This book aims to investigate this second side of the coin, by trying to convey an analysis of the different facets of the contemporary urban shape. The first thing which should be noted is that each author contributes to a single chapter (in addition to a short collective introduction). This provides a clear-cut differentiation of the main themes and interests of each one of them. The chapter written by Barile verges on the historical development of the city as the place of production and capitalist accumulation, from the feudal city to the contemporary globalised directional centre. Raffini focuses more on the political geographies of the different mobilities and im-mobilities on the background of the networked society. Lastly, Alteri dives in the contradictions of peripheral areas and neighbourhoods in their relationship with the centre, by sketching out a description of the ghettoization process and how it affects the political life of cities. At the same time, the work is quite coherent and focused, dealing with the same theoretical questions and overarching interpretative frames. The common background where the authors develop their argumentation is constituted by the transformation of cities into something else. Urban sociology and geography have been extensively struggling with these research questions and topic in the latest twenty years (e.g. Soja, 2000; Sassen, 2001; Brenner, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Martinotti, 2017); but here it acquires some novelty, for its explicit focus on the relation of the three aforementioned thematic focuses. Accumulation, mobility, and marginalised neighbourhoods are analysed in their reciprocal relationship, and they are put in relation with the crisis of citizenship and the depoliticisation of the everyday life of urban dwellers.

Aim and interpretative perspective

The departure of this short – yet intense – exploration of the heuristics of the conceptual couple city/metropolis is the realisation of an epistemic fracture between the two terms. The first is bounded, modern, industrial, inhabited; the latter is never-ending, postmodern, postfordist, and “passed-through” - by people, by information fluxes, by logistic chains. In opposition to a commonplace idea, the metropolis is not just the “big” city of the future, the place where most humans will live soon¹: instead, the three authors try to convey the idea of a «qualitative, epistemic, spatial, social» (p. 8) break with the modern configurations of cities, mirrored by transformations in the relations of production, which caused this shift in the first place. Quite close to the stance assumed by the three authors, the idea of «post-metropolis» (Soja; 2000) is important inasmuch it defines a semantic space, where an array of processes is inscribed. In fact, modernity has been overcome by the complexity of new forms of govern and control; economic power is progressively leaving room to the financial determinants of urban development; the nation-state is shallow and unable to govern the converging complexity of supra-national and regional assemblages; urban and extra-urban territories are collapsing on one-another, in a “polynuclear”, “reticular”, “informational” becoming of the urban texture. These theoretical developments are rooted in the importance to analyse socio-spatial relations (Jessop et al., 2008), and how these connect to specific configurations of power and social interests.

If the question is to understand what the spaces of power are in contemporary societies, the answer cannot be found without taking into account how cities have been changing, together with the humans living there. In the very first pages, we find a call for analysing cities and social change, starting from the new economic orders of the world: without an understanding of how the processes of production and accumulation have been changing, it is difficult to investigate the changing nature of the contemporary city: in fact, understanding economic and financial processes without a reference to the uneven distribution of capital is an obfuscation. The contemporary city has been replacing the nation-state in organising, regulating and articulating the global flows of production, distribution, consumption and investment: «The illusory productive dispersion is concealing the actual concentration of private capital» (p. 26). This relation is still riven with contradictions, as the global city is shaped by supranational interests, while urban policies are still deeply rooted in local contexts and developed by local institutions and administrations. Here lies the conundrum the authors deal with: the more the metropolis is invested with the task of organising and regulating global flows of capital, the more it loses «every reference to the city, and to the characteristics of modern politics it had been embodying for two centuries» (p.33). As Sassen (2001) notes, the dispersion of productive activities in a global system is coupled with a “centralization of control”, and with the - perceived - dissolution of a bond between private enterprise and public control of economic activities. This dissolution takes place on the stage of globally interconnected cities, breaking the link between elites and national states, cities, or whatsoever collective formation of the modernity. This shows the importance of the metropolis as «directional centre» of global capitalism, where the flow of commodities is ideated, sold, and sustained through the required services.

It is crucial to emphasise that this does not imply the vanishing of the state, at least not of all its elements: the neoliberal mode of govern is rooted in the expansion of penal (incarceration) and paternalist (workfarism) aspects of regulation of the underclasses (Wacquant, 2009). Likewise, the economy is still very mediated by the state, as part of the literature on neoliberalism shows (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Dardot and Laval 2013; Moini 2016). Although it holds true that the state has a decreased influence in economic planning and a reduced

¹ For a critique of the empirical inconsistency of the notion of “Urban age”, see Brenner and Schmid (2014). Alteri in this book develops the idea that the rural is fully subsumed in the urban in both spatial and economic terms. In other words, the rural condition of today is undifferentiated from the peripheral one, at least in European cities: both are subaltern and are part of the same colonising process.

ability to develop its redistributive functions, the regulative aspect is still in place in the creation of a juridical-administrative framework that enables the global value chain. This is interpreted as a process of dualization of the contemporary city: while its frame of reference is international, its relationship with the surroundings breaks, leading to a colonisation of marginal urban areas, which are devoid of any political capacity. The metropolis is now «a logistic good» (p. 37) polarised between an international upper class of managers, bureaucrats, professionals who move across borders, and an equally international underclass, whose contradiction is shaped by the mobility regimes imposed by migratory chains and the fixedness of localised economies.

For this reason, the aim of the book is to re-examine the concept of metropolis, to understand how the uninterrupted urbanisation process is coupled with a loss of sense of the city itself. On the one hand, cities tend to favour the process of valorisation, while on the other side this precise process is played out on a global scenario, a de-territorialised plane where the most elemental redistributive options are precluded. This, in turn, affects the grammar of democracy: it is exactly this de-territorialisation that poses the precondition to elude social conflict. This affects the very possibility of citizenship: how can the right to the city be exerted if the modern link between city and political participation is broken? All this hints to a transformation of the role of the city as unitary concept, while the nation-state as decisional core is disintegrating.

Throughout the book, the authors try to convey three main points. It is useful to summarise them before a more thorough exploration. First of all, the crisis of the representation of urban life is also a crisis in the capacity to exert citizenship and its rights. The city is laden with conflicts which are political and yet cannot be understood with the lens of politics by the people involved. Secondly, some processes we used to understand as bounded and separated - yet interwoven, of course - are now all mixed up. The metropolis is spurring hybrids and it is generating new ambivalences and contradictions. The political lemmas of the past are unable to collect the frustration, and to make sense of how the same neighbourhood can give birth to anti-authoritarian riots one day and to racialised pogroms the day after. The third key point, maybe the most interesting and generative that the authors try to develop, is constituted by the inherent duality of the metropolis, where the centre has a colonial relationship with “its” peripheries. To put it simply, the centre needs the periphery, as the prerequisite for capital accumulation, while at the same time political relevance to people and social groups living there is negated. This, in turn, is the basis for a depoliticisation and lack of recognition of the life-worlds of the marginalised ones: these processes affect the very possibility of a politicisation of the margins themselves.

City and modernization

The first thesis is that the process of modernisation and the one of urbanisation constitute a bind, tied around the politicisation of the everyday life in the industrial city. The reasoning is based on the depiction of the process of concentration - of goods and economic processes, but also of bodies and ideas - as the essence of the modern city, following the ideas of Weber and Lefebvre. This means that the development of urban society itself is entirely contingent on the rise of capitalism. Following Lefebvre, there is a progressive overlap between the city and society as a whole: the city attracts the commerce, the production, the people, the ideas. Commodities were circulating in the social texture of the urban-agrarian complex, but the city slowly becomes the place where the exchange happens, and where the market - as physical space of trade - is instituted and operating - as metaphysical economic institution. What distinguishes the city as its own specific formation, different from the encampment or the trade post, is the presence of associative institutions, such as guilds or the self-governing authorities of the medieval communes. In this sense, the contradiction which shapes the

modern city corresponds to an increasingly isolated and disenfranchised individual who, thanks to this condition, begins to find their associative dimension outside the range of ascribed categories.

Flash forward from the late-medieval city to the arcades of late 18th century city. Both capital and labour undergo a process of concentration in this historical phase, driven by the industrial rationality which needs the big factory as its organising modality. The regulation of the following urban society is unattainable for the medieval guild, incapable to respond to the massive concentration of the labour force and of its rapid growth inside the boundaries of the industrialising city. At the same time, the city becomes also the site of consumption, not only of production: people of all social classes, with different roles and positions in the new society, are living together in the same urban space, «destined at the same time to territorial unity and social disharmony» (p.21). The city becomes the locus of class struggle, revolts and unrest: this leads also to the necessity to acknowledge the growing proletariat, its existence as a class and political subject, in an attempt to regulate and reduce its revolutionary outbursts (Piven and Cloward, 1971).

It becomes necessary, in other terms, an uninterrupted activity of mediation between the interests of the capital and those of the working class. And economic needs are coupled with the necessity to govern the contentious subjectivity, «the urban proletariat [...] is object of rights [...] to defuse the ungovernable charge of metropolitan space. This legal-formal acknowledgment is telling of the apparition of modernity in power relationships» (p. 24): it is the cornerstone of modern citizenship, which translates into the possibility of being included for the adhesion to an ideal, not in virtue of birth-right or money. This is something we will find again at the end of this excursus: the city today does not need to include individuals and collective subjects to protect its own ontological structure.

This nexus breaks down when the global value chain begins to hollow out the regulatory capacity of the nation-state, in favour of a metropolitan competition played out on a global scale: it is the concept of scale itself that is called into question by these transformations (e.g. Smith, 1992; Marston, 2000). Similarly, the concept of border has been called into question: if once its features of porosity and permeability were the result of analysis, today they often constitute the assumption, or the lens through which we can understand different and intertwined processes of inclusion and exclusion (Walters, 2002). A strong point of this book aims to remind us that the representation of a free, immaterial and unbounded capitalism is a narrative: the metropolis is the place where the processes of globalisation are territorialised and have a material, «physical» incorporation in the everyday life, which subsumes the contradictions of this process. The main of these contradictions, conjured from the very title of the book, is the dissociation between power and politics: the metropolitan dimension tends to exclude the polis, the political activity of subjects (Scandurra, 2011).

The global city

Succinctly, the globalisation process is related to the process of de-managerialization of urban govern (Harvey, 1989): while urban planning was once mostly dependent on state transfers, today we see a process of decentralisation which is increasingly pushing cities towards the necessity to design local strategies, to develop global competition, in order to attract investments. Contemporary cities are then required to do what they did before, and even something more - offering services and functions deployed on a globalized scale - with less resources. This led to what Harvey indicates as the entrepreneurialization of cities: the strategy metropolises adopt to survive is a competition *erga omnes* where they have to offer competitive goods to attract global services. This is strongly connected with the development of a global real estate market, an «urban warfare» (Rolnik, 2019). In this scenario, international investment funds try to build and valorise real estate assets, by

actively shaping neighbourhoods in a logic of differential spatial planning, where entire areas are systematically over-invested, valorised with new buildings and projects, in the face of the abandonment of others (Aalbers, 2016). Gentrification is just a part of this phenomenon, maybe the more apparent. The process of urban planning is senseless in these conditions: the city abdicates to its main prerogative, the possibility to shape itself. It is clear that, if the presence of a global middle-class is expected to produce a return equal to half the budget of a city itself - as it would have been in the case of the establishment of the European Medicines Agency in Milan - politics will be centred around their needs and requests. The other face of gentrification, maybe its extremization, is the process of touristification. Short time rentals, whose beneficiaries are tourists as well as city users, is moulding the city centre in a direction which is radically different from the past: it is a process that can be read with a dual lens of expulsion and segregation. Once again, we can see how «local public bodies are chosen by residents, but the economic interests of the metropolis is increasingly dependent from people that are not politically accountable for the city» (Martinotti, 2017 120).

Gentrification and touristification are therefore intertwined processes of hollowing out of the central and semi-central areas, where the mechanism of inclusion/exclusion is primarily revolving around the capacity to afford - a rent, a specific type of leisure, the cost of supermarkets, the judgment of others. The colonisation of once working-class neighbourhoods or blocks is driven by the economic and symbolic force of a transnational elite: in a reversion of the sociological classic, the established are pushed away from the outsiders. As Raffini aptly notes, it would be simplistic to reduce this conflict to the dichotomy between a «cosmopolitan» ideology and the advocacy of a return to autarkic policies: this apparent conflict is played out on the same aforementioned ground, the one of the dualization that economic determinants introduce in the metropolitan area. It is a false dichotomy, a narrative that tends to obfuscate how much the one lives for the other.

This allows to see how the contemporary city is affected by different mobilities: (im)mobility is played out on the ground of social reproduction and the capacity to shape boundaries and borders, both on the symbolic and the material level. Just think how difficult it is for a beggar to quietly cross the city centre, as opposed to the relative facility to navigate space for tourists. «Today more than ever, the forms of spatial mobility – and immobility – are associated with social mobility/immobility», says Raffini, and this is outrageously apparent today, for those “essential workers” that had to take a bus, a regional train, a subway train to go to work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Another element of the analysis is constituted by an additional paradox of im/mobilities, specific of the economic sector. In fact, on the one hand the process of financialization transforms fixed assets into mobile commodities, able to travel across international circuits at the speed of light (Sassen 2014, Rolnik 2019). At the same time, the narrative of the fixity of the labour market has been one of the major drivers for austerity measures, allowing the uneven process of social spending recalibration.

The city and the (anti)city

In the last chapter, Luca Alteri explores the theme of the “anti-city”, the periphery. He chooses the term “ghetto” to introduce the idea of a space of seclusion, a membrane which keeps out, as much as it keeps in. The relation with the centre is of subalternity, as suggested by the Greek prefix peri- or the Latin sub-, both implying the idea of a separated space of lesser importance.

But the suburban space is not just a topographic dimension of the cities: in fact, we are aware of how homelessness and severe deprivation are present in the everyday space of the city centre too. The distinction is more of a sociographic nature, based on the inscription of meanings on the inhabitants of the ghetto: the non-city is the space “good for nothing”, not even for the process of real estate valorisation - as gentrification

is always semi-peripheral - and so are its inhabitants. The coloniality of the relationship instituted by the centre is clearly highlighted by the main institutions one can meet in the suburbs: the projects, the police station, the church, the mall. Each one of them voted to either social control or consumption. Through processes of categorisation, marginalisation, creation of deviant quasi-citizens, the contemporary metropolis is actively building a part of itself where the dispossessed are to live (Wacquant 2008, 2009). The metropolis imposes a neo-colonial classification of space: the inherent duality of the labour market is mirrored in the duality of the urban fabric, where the centre is «imbricated in economic and financial global fluxes, and is designated to be the directive and receptive space for the needs of an high-skilled transnational workforce of professionals» (p. 37). At the same time, the periphery is «characterized by a juridical-administrative anomie, containing a labour force which “sells” elsewhere their work» (p. 37).

In his chapter Raffini (pp. 106-108) tries to sketch out an ideal typical morphology of the urban space, highlighting the existence of: central districts - with directive, administrative, touristic functions; central residential districts - home of the established bourgeoisie; old popular neighbourhoods - the space of gentrifying processes as well as organised resistance; new popular neighbourhoods - progressively diverse today, where the conflict is mostly between old residents and incoming migrants; ultra-peripheral neighbourhoods - marginalised both in an urbanistic and socioeconomic terms, what Alteri calls the “anti-city”. Therefore it is not casual that the most recognised social activities – ranging from activism to third sector initiatives – are developed in the two middle terms of this typological continuum: these are the spaces where citizenship can still be understood through the classic categories of community, activism, participation. Urban margins are the plastic representation of a class fracture. The peripheral space is then the proper space of the metropolis: city centres can be seen as the exception, the deterritorialised realm of elites. For this reason, the terms of their relationship are understood here as neo-colonial: the periphery is where most people live, work, desire; and yet the decisions on collective life are taken elsewhere, in a space where they are voiceless.

Years of neoliberal individualisation and interiorization of the principles of self-government are now put into practice to mould the everyday experience of the marginalized dwellers: the impossibility to get out the ghetto is often framed as an individual incapacity and assumed as a personal failure. Here people learn strategies of dissimulation, the lure of informality, the surviving techniques of the dispossessed (p. 148), in a revolt against authorities which rarely coalesces in a collective process. Inside the ghetto people can't just refuse institutionalised social ends: taking publicly the space, daring to speak and to voice a concern or a collective claim is quite the opposite of the behaviour expected from the marginalised subject. The alterity and opposition to power and its symbols are always played out against the background of the rules of the field: «the “colonisation” of popular classes operated by higher classes annihilates every political instinct» (p.127). The only possible answer is a rejection of power and socially legitimated means. It is the «short circuit» of understanding that legitimated means - work, education, respect for laws, honesty - are insufficient: «only money [...] secures redemption» (p.129). The attempt to defend an autonomous and self-regulated space can sometimes lead to sudden outbursts of conflict, only vaguely referred in the terms of class relationships.

Those who try to develop conflictual actions of mutualism or solidarity need to be well-known in the neighbourhood, to possess a “street-credibility” that comes from years of work on the territory, explains Alteri, noting an often overlooked aspect of the literature on squatting and housing movements. This intersects also with a sort of paradoxical double-standard for migrants: even if they are poorer than the “natives”, they are faced with more rigid standards of behaviour in order to be included in the group of those allowed to break the rules. An impolitic violence is the code of conduct in these spaces, and bullying, subjugation, clanization, structural and incorporated violence seem to be the only responses available. People living in the ghetto know too well what the dominant frames and role-models are, and long for them: this is the reason that leads Alteri to say that it is unrealistic to expect a subversion of those values coming autonomously from the periphery.

At the same time, it is important not to fetishize margins: this is not a detached and lifeless account of urban marginality as a fate, a structural destiny. Instead, Alteri tries to develop its argument around the lives of popular class subjects, with their own contradictions, motives, agency. A crucial point is constituted by the lack of an organised structure to convey the resentment, and to intermediate the political imagination always flowing along the borders. The incapacity to offer a convincing meta-narrative for sustaining action is posed as a complex issue worth considering in depth, but it is important not to underestimate that «gradually, in our urban ghettos are finding space associative and self-organised experiences» (p.137). The possibility that these waves of contention from – and of – the margins may develop to become forms of insurgent citizenship is always open: Holston shows how in Brazilian cities the working classes and underclasses have in some occasions joined together, to develop processes of subjectivation «not primarily through the struggles of labor but through those of the city» (Holston, 2009 4). Once again, the theme of mobility is central: «Moving, we confront the realities of choice and location. Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations [...] towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible» (hooks 1989, 15).

The described process is akin to the concept of alienation: the growing distance between city, dwellers, and sense-making activities is exemplified by the assertion that «the process of exploitation that once took place in the factory is today spread in the whole City» (p. 157), with the crucial difference of the difficulty to mobilise and sustain a collective organisation paralleled to the workers' movement. There are «islands of suburban mobilisation that never become archipelago, always swinging between “movement” and “countermovement”» (p. 159). This is understood as a fracture in the political tissue of the cities: if the city is, by definition, political, the disappearance of politics from the scene marks the advent of the metropolis as conceptual category and epistemic horizon.

To conclude, there are a few remarks that could be made, mostly revolving around what lies unexplored. I think it could be fruitful to explore some possible lines of departure from here, sketching out possible future paths of research. First of all, the delineated framework works well with medium and big cities, but it could be interesting to explore the conditions of production of the urban fabric in small-sized cities, i.e. peripheral towns which are not entirely subsumed by the metropolis, in the light of a different articulation of local politics and a - supposed - distance from global fluxes of capital. Secondly, the analysis could further explore the agency of actors and groups involved. The contrast between a localised bourgeoisie and global elites is not central in the analysis of the authors, but it could be a fruitful addition to investigate the competing and cooperative strategies adopted by different actors, across different fields and spaces in the light of their specific interests. A third aspect which could add to the developed framework, would be to consider time as a structuring axis that, along with space, shapes the everyday experience of urban dwellers: the intertwined themes of the «tempography of domination» (Auyero 2012) and of the capacity to think about the future – to aspire - from the margins are briefly touched, but they are never actively employed to explore how they intersect with spatial determinants of social life. It is debatable that the structuring dyad of contemporary metropolises is circumscribed into the spatiality of local/global, with a reduced relevance of past/future, as the authors seems to entail. For example, it could be interesting to see the process of differential mobilities in the city in the light of temporal constraints, as part of the literature on migrations or on gentrification suggest. For example, the case of “Tiburtina valley” (pp. 66-83) allows a spatio-temporal diagramming of the flows of investment, decay, resistances, waits, inconsistencies in different timings («the industrial crisis [...] didn't stop the process of expansion of economic activities, as if the infrastructural build-up was already completed, worsening every indicator of the quality of life in the area», p. 79).

The question that opens this book, «what is the place of power in a society increasingly narrated as reticular and polycentric?» (p.5) does not generate a simple and unambiguous answer. This book does not actually offer

an answer to the multiplicity of questions it sheds. And this is one of its merits: it is the acknowledgement of the open-ended nature of power relationships, always to be determined through the elaboration of social conflict.

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