

PRECARIOUSNESS OF THE URBAN LIFE: SOWING THE SEEDS OF CONFLICT.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the concept of conflict within the new field of urban ethics. After a quick view on the topic of the ideal city as utopia, thoroughly depicted in the history of philosophy, the paper analyses the concept of space and one specific property of it: replicability. After defining it, the paper shows how this specific quality of space fosters precariousness within the socio-economic urban fabric: hence, the concept of the precarious city is outlined. The paper pinpoints the main consequences of precariousness for the urban lifestyle, particularly for the urban peripheries, and highlights how replicability and precariousness shape conflict within the city and among different urban areas and dwellers. The paper concludes with an assessment whether conflict is a physiological condition for urban life and the harmonious city a mere utopia or otherwise.

Keywords: urban ethics, space, city, conflict, precariousness.

1. Before the conflict: the ideal city

The new field of Urban Ethics focuses on the “good city” and its practices. The idea of the good city dates back to the ancient Greek philosophers, in particular the depiction of the ideal city as an unreachable utopia. It is well known that Plato was the first philosopher to significantly outline the characteristics of the good city. He described extensively the specific geographical, physical, territorial, social, and political properties that the ideal city had to exhibit. Plato provided a successful theoretical model, which was enhanced in following frameworks, e.g. Augustine’s *The City of God*, More’s *Utopia*, or Campanella’s *The City of Sun* are but a few clear examples.

The ideal city was grounded in the concept of justice, to be meant as order and harmony. The term *kallipolis* was used by Plato in *The Republic* and in *The Laws*. In the Books II and III of the first work, Socrates presents the characteristics of the city, which progressively expands its limits, turning into an urban settlement. The known platonic theory on the labour division is based on the idea that each citizen works in the proper field, according to their nature and skills. So, “carpenters, then, and smiths and many similar craftsmen, associating themselves with our hamlet, will enlarge it considerably. [...] Yet it still wouldn’t be very large even if we should add to them neat-herds and shepherds and other herders, so that the farmers might have cattle for ploughing, and the builders’ oxen to use with the farmers for transportation, and the weavers and cobblers hides and fleeces for their use. [...] But further it is practically impossible to establish the city in a region where it will not need imports. [...] There will be a further need, then, of those who will bring in from some other city what it requires (Plato, 1903, 370 D-E).

In Books IV and V the issue of the order, or harmony of the ideal city, is portrayed by Plato through diverse allegories. The most famous is the one of the chariots: Plato outlines a comparison between the tripartite human soul and the tripartite city, in order to explain that the rational part only – both of the soul and of the city – grants justice. And in Books VIII and IX, Plato provides with a detailed view on the historical modes of civic organisation, which represent degenerations of the ideal city.

The aim of this paper is not to determine whether Plato’s model was the beginning of a long philosophical legacy of the “just” city – Mumford’s (1962) key analysis has already offered a possible interpretation on this. It is important to highlight that the ancient city is not a philosophical topic only. In the first instance, it represents urban life – the life of citizens, wayfarers, merchants, soldiers, men, women, and children who shared public spaces within a community. Beyond the urban settings of the Sumerians or the ancient Egyptians, Alcaeus of Mytilene, circa 630 B.C., reminds us that “cities are not stones or timbers or the craft of builders; but wherever there are men who know how to defend themselves, there are walls and cities” (Alcaeus, 1982, 426). And, if there are walls and cities, there might be conflicts.

2. The city and its space

Alcaeus offers a clear view of what cities were intended to be, beyond the utopian models of a just city — cities are and always will be living communities of people. The ancient sources focus on the

central role played by space in particular. The city is in essence the organisation of space, allowing people to live as a community. There is organisation of space in camps and villages also. In cities however, this relationship between humans and space has evolved in more complex and dynamic ways. So, what is the definition of space, and more specifically, urban space? It is interesting to note the relationship that exists between space and urban ethics, as well as general ethics. As per Aristotle and Heidegger, we know that the term 'ethos' means 'habit' or 'custom', which derives from the original meaning 'abode' or 'haunt:' ethics comes from the plural of ἦθος, not from the plural of ἔθος (Aristotle, 1934, 1103a). Heidegger adds his own explanation of the terms, beginning with a fragment by Heraclitus; for Heidegger, "ἦθος means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which the human being dwells. The open region of his abode allows what pertains to the essence of the human being, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear. [...] If the name 'ethics,' in keeping with the basic meaning of the word ἦθος, should now say that ethics ponders the abode of the human being" (Heidegger, 1998, pp. 269-271). The original meaning of ethics, in the context of space, has even more significance, when we refer to the space contained within the city. This is what urban ethics is about after all.

Many philosophers have written extensively on the meaning of space: Foucault, Lefebvre, and Augé, amongst others, have broadly explained what space is and the different kinds of space exist. In general, space has several properties: for example, Foucault (1994) introduces the concept of 'heterotopies' where he proposes that there are certain places which have the special role of connecting different kinds of space, e.g. a cemetery, an airport, a ship. The idea that physical space implies a precise meaning of the social space has not only been proposed by Foucault. When we travel by train, we can reserve a seat in first or second class: they are different, separated, distinct spaces on the train. Specific carriages are destined to first-class travellers in specific positions of the train, and so is it for the second-class travellers. The choice of the seat also changes space on airplanes: many airlines sell their best seats or for the assignment of a seat onboard and different seats have different prices; seats with larger space for legs or seats in the first rows deliver a more comfortable journey or a quicker disembarkation and cost more. Also at the airport, if we are members of a frequent-flyers service, then we can access an exclusive line to the check-in desk; we can embark by jumping the queue through a priority lane; if we have a proper card, we can spend the layover at a lounge, almost hidden areas which are clearly separated from the airport crowd, where time seems

to stop and the atmosphere gets soft and tasty. In many hotels, the status of premium traveller grants an automatic smile from the receptionist, cheerful and quicker check-in desks, or access to exclusive areas or services of the hotel (a pool or a tea room). In all these cases, time for embarking, for passing security, for claiming the luggage will often be reduced. I will likely arrive at the hotel sooner, I will enter my room earlier, and my experience will be more pampering thanks to the benefits and privileges of my status.

3. Properties of space: replicability

The previous argument is to show the first property of space: *representability*. Space is always represented, because we always use representations of space: Foucault's 'heterotopies' are a clear example. We never interact with naked physical space: there is always an interpretative framework, sometimes a real cognitive bias, that allows us to view space. As Searle (2010) has widely shown, our world is always an institutional world, never just a physical one. There is a second property of space, which is crucial in my opinion: *replicability*. Space tends to be associated to a specific place, to coordinates, to the history and traditions of that specific geographical spot. Yet, that is not always true. Ortega y Gasset (2012) focused on the Spanish term *aquí* (here) in order to affirm that we are, and we speak from, a specific point: there is always a 'here'. However, De Certeau (1990) and Augé (1992) did not go that far. Therefore, space seems to have the property of *localisability*: it is always possible to locate a space, and space always bears its specific location. Nonetheless, not all space is located or localisable: this is termed *replicable space*. Following Augé's definition of 'non-places' and Lussault's 'hyper-places' (2017), *replicable space* is the property of places such as airports, malls, supermarkets, stations and post offices, to name a few; these places are not located. For example, we could say that all Chinatowns of the world are non-places, as they all tend to be replicas of a model, whose original place was located.

So, what is the difference between replicable and localisable spaces? Their function. Localisable spaces tend to be *destination spaces*: Hyde Park in London, Venice, Charlottenburg in Berlin or Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, Shibuya in Tokyo, the bookstore around the corner, the restaurant at the end of the street are all destination spaces: in localised spaces, people live experiences beyond the pure function these spaces may have, and the quality of their experience is strictly dependent on their specific location. In comparison, airports and shopping centres are *usable spaces*: the experience

people have within them are not dependent on the specific geographical coordinates of that space. Airports and malls tend to be very similar in their structure; this characteristic is very important, since people want to use them easily, in order to depart on time or find the groceries they need for their dinner. So, *replicability* is a great property of space; issues stem when *destination spaces* are used as *replicable spaces*.

In order to understand the problem, it should be made clear that there is a difference between *space* and *place*, that Sennett (2018) describes. Moreover, his reference to Heidegger (1971) opens up to the ancestral meanings of dwelling and living. Heidegger's example of the bridge is the essence of what a place is, instead of being a mere abstract space. The bridge connects spaces, places and people and is perfectly located. It must be perfectly located in order for it to properly connect as a bridge. So, when replicability is applied to urban areas, historical districts, green areas and parks, these spaces lose their connection to their location. Replicable space turns streets, residential areas, and city centres into the same kind of experience; for example, the shopping or tourist experiences in Amsterdam or Madrid tend to be quite similar nowadays. Streets present the same brands, the same shops, the same signs, logos and colours. Local food, local craftwork, and local space tend to disappear; destination space is replaced by usable space. Replicable space eventually results in *homogenisation*; there is no more space for diversity. Biodiversity is not fostered or is even destroyed. The city ceases to be a network of markets, cultures, ideas, people, existences; replicable space expands itself indefinitely. The result is an ongoing segregation of different spaces, losing their original connections. Diverse people and cultures no longer merge, instead living in isolated blocks and areas according to the replicability of their space.

4. Urban sprawl, segregation, precarity

Cities have expanded in the last seventy years as conurbations, in patchwork structures which have swallowed the surrounding suburban areas. *Urban sprawl* is the modern model of the city. The term was explained by Batty et al. (2003) as uncontrolled, unplanned and uncoordinated growth, which also implies unsustainability. Urban sprawl implies a continuous extension of urban fabric that fills the 'rural void' which originally separated the city and the countryside. The main factor in the rapid increase in urban sprawl is the use of replicable space; in fact, urban sprawl is an ongoing repetition of similar structures and areas comprised of residential areas, shopping centres, highways or avenues,

where an automobile is necessary to reach all parts of the sprawled city. Replicability also impacts historical districts; malls or new shopping outlets often mock the architectural style of specific traditions.

The sprawled city turns into a *simulated city*: if the modern city rises as a simulation of industry, eventually the whole metropolis becomes a spectacular simulation of what urban life used to be.

It is not only the simulation that Baudrillard meant by the use of the term ‘hyper-real,’ but it is a “hyperspace without atmosphere” (1981), where reality is merely operative, that is functional. Reality is made up from uses, functions, aims. If in the past the plan had to adapt to the territory, now the territory must adapt to plans and projects. With no adherence to the local and specific existence of the territory, the urban sprawl produces one of the most dangerous consequences: monoculture (Sennett, 2018). The repetition of identical elements drives individuals to intend space as a homogenous entity, with no possibility of interruptions or deviations. What this lack of knowledge of diversity and deviation delivers to new generations is beyond the aim of this paper; nonetheless, it is doubtless that a pervasive experience of homogeneity fosters conformity, and undermines the ability to recognize and understand diversity. The existence of localised, non-replicable space is our chance to accustom ourselves to diversity in terms of ideas, cultures and politics. As an agricultural terrain that becomes quickly impoverished by monocultural soil, the monocultural city, based on replicable space, tends to offer poorer experiences to its dwellers.

The simulated city is an evolution of the sprawled city made possible by the advent of digitalisation. Digitalisation defines the world in terms of functioning, optimisation, efficiency, economy and speed. What does not match the digital grid logic of ‘plug and play’ is simply considered as nonexistent. One concept following this model is ‘new military urbanism’ (Graham, 2011), which warns about the persistent use of digital information within the city; security cameras monitor our movements, and combed with a digital card used for transportation or parking, cameras record access to our vehicles and combine this data with our payments and fidelity cards at the shops. However, we will focus here on the concept of the *precarious city*: if our mantra is ‘functioning,’ then any individuals who do not function according to the needs and requirements of the digital simulated city are negated, with little chance of personal growth. The socio-ethical effects here are self-evident: the impossibility of living in the central areas of the city, and thus the necessity to dwell in the more degraded areas at the outskirts; worse access to the transportation system with longer commuting times and less

comfortable journeys; poor access to recreational areas or parks; poor environmental quality; proximity of polluting industries; proximity of noisy roads or hubs, such as airports.

The main consequence of the use of replicable space is that richer blocks tend to make the nearby blocks richer, whereas the poorer areas tend to be contagious to the next areas. The homogeneity of the replicable space means that if something negative affects a block, the next blocks tend to suffer from similar negativity, just because its space is similarly set. Hence, the city's homogeneity grows and amplifies differences by segregating what is not similar. This is confirmed by similar social groups who tend to live in similar areas in relation to their specific ethnic origin, spoken language or salary.

Precarity has been one of the key marks of urban life, as literature, art, and philosophy have richly depicted and analysed. The many faces of alienation, loneliness, exclusion, and marginalisation become pressing within the functional city, where the opportunities of life are strictly dependent on the ability to match the functioning grid. As Chan reminds us, precarity of contemporary urban life is caused by precarity of work: the worker's opportunities are often linked to a precarious job, or a part-time job, often underpaid (Chan, 2019, p. 30). In such a capitalistic society as the globalised one, people who has no access to that system risk being out of it. These radical differences get spatially stratified: the city ends up dividing the citizens according to their real possibility of staying within the system; people who stay out of the system, also stay out of the city.

5. Precarity as a source of conflict

So, economic precarity soon turns into social and urban precarity: citizens who are economically depressed lose their connections to the fabric of the city and its social and cultural opportunities. Precarity fosters alienation, loneliness, and exclusion. Eventually, socio-ethical precarity also appears to be an environmental precarity: citizens living in the peripheries usually do not have access to the same environmental quality of the citizens living in richer areas of the city; they do not have parks, green areas, or, if they have access to them, those areas are often neglected; there is an uncontrolled concretification, which drives dwellers to conceive urban life as a conflict with natural elements. The presence of facilities, industries, airports or ports highly increases noise or air pollution. The experience of nature that the inhabitants of the peripheries have makes them recall violence as a means to dominate nature: air, water, and soil pollution, landfills, toxic waste management, chaotic,

polluting and noisy mobility and transportation, proximity to ports and airports, higher rates of illness and death related to pollution all take the shape of a conflict between urban life and wilderness. The most dangerous consequence is that dwellers shape the relationship with nature in terms of conflict, violence, and domination. This is also experienced during violent natural events: precarious space is more apt to undergo stronger impact from natural calamities, such as the effects of a rainstorm, with possible flooding and damage to houses.

This experience of the contrast between the city and nature produces the first kind of urban conflict: in the peripheries, nature is absent; concrete and paving dominate the scene; when nature comes up it is experienced as rainstorms, strong winds, deadly heat, and it is never a pleasant environment. Either nature is utterly absent, or it heralds unkind conditions, delivering the idea of a contrast between humans and nature, and fostering the view of nature as dangerous, an enemy, and something to be conquered and dominated.

At the socio-ethical level, the existence of a precarious space produces disasters. This is because the precarious space has the same properties of every other kind of space: replicability. It is not uncommon to see an uncontrolled expansion of the peripheries, where decay is amplified by the construction of the same kinds of buildings, separated by the same kinds of streets. And if spatial structure determines social structure, then an expanding decayed space produces a multiplication of decay in the socio-economic fabric.

Therefore, a tremendously negative property of the precarious space is that, by creating exclusion and accustoming to segregation and marginalisation, it sows the seeds of conflict. Peripheries familiarise themselves with conflict in several ways: stable job vs. precarious job; job vs. unemployment; access to services vs. exclusion from services (or access to decayed services); higher education vs. lower schooling; better political representation vs. total absence of institutions; higher security vs. widespread crime; better life opportunities vs. alienation and frustration; more order and cleanliness vs. disorder and poor hygienic conditions. The list may be much longer.

It is noteworthy that this scenario is often related to psychological conditions that tend to amplify the perception of the contrast and the feeling of abandonment. So, conflict often evolves to a deep sense of injustice: the dwellers of the peripheries often play the role of victims and the conflict is addressed to the richest parts of the cities, beyond authorities. Rage and tension are common feelings in the peripheries. Conflict as a habit means that the dwellers tend to have a general and pervasive

experience of conflict: everything is shaped as a conflict and action often results in vandalism, protest, rebellion, and destruction. The persistent experience of the urban life as conflict paradoxically impacts areas or people who are in similar decayed conditions: an example is the conflict between people living in poor areas and migrants – who have much more in common than not.

Conflict also affects the development of the city: technology, education, and universities are all seen as the cause of the increase of social and economic inequalities. Technology, in particular, is seen as the origin of unemployment, because the jobs with less specialisation tend to be easily lost, while new professions emerge provided that higher educational levels are granted – which means higher unbearable costs. The last kind of social urban conflict has been experienced during the lockdown of many cities because of the Covid-19 pandemic: restaurants, cafes, and local grocery stores have been forced to close; when some opening has been allowed, food delivery was the only available service: the so-called *riders*, who deliver food by scooter or bicycle, have provided an essential service. As Chan writes, the conflict rises because a dual-track society emerges: as in a new feudalism, there are workers and their servants (Chan, 2019). In the *gig economy*, hyper-specialisation of professions calls for servants for the vital needs: as servants they access a space from which they are generally cut out as dwellers.

6. Conclusions

I have tried to explain the connection between urban conflict and urban space: a specific property of space, *replicability*, determines, along with the excesses of digitalisation, urban sprawl and socio-ethical inequalities. This goes beyond the technical issue of the *digital divide*; this has to do with *human divide*. I have tried to show that in these conditions conflict becomes a pervasive experience which shapes the whole urban life, at the socio-cultural and economic levels – against richer dwellers or against poorer migrants – and at the environmental levels – against nature, which is seen in terms of violence and domination. Conflict becomes the paradigm of urban life and all the dynamics and relations within the urban fabric tend to be dealt with conflict, violence, intolerance, vandalism, with little room for civil and open discussion.

Peguy (1898) outlined the *harmonious city*, where no strangers may exist. One of the crucial challenges of the future cities is to understand whether urban life may imply harmony or the only possible experience unavoidably involves a certain degree of conflict.

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