Contest Discourses of Austerity in the Urban Margins (A Vision from Barcelona)

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> "...the contradictions of capitalism may be witnessed more clearly at the margins" (Katz 1996:172)

> "Sin trabajo, sin casa, sin pensión, sin miedo"
> ("No job, no house, no pension, no fear",
> street protests of the youth in Spain, 2011)

The global crisis has been the perfect excuse for the deployment of neo-liberal policies that have had their most visible effect in the severe cutbacks of social rights and the growing concentration of both public and private investments in certain privileged issues and spaces. As a result, there has been an accentuated social and spatial polarisation at all levels, from the global to the urban. These policies have been accompanied by the existence of a tremendous gap between a hegemonic neo-liberal discourse that evaluates the present crisis in very abstract terms (such as foreign debt, markets weakness, risk premium, investors' confidence and so on) and the terrible effects of such policies in the spaces of people's daily lives. In these spaces, the so-called economic crisis is by no means an abstraction but a very material and tangible situation that has appalling effects on the weakest population: foreclosures, lack of social assistance, increasing waiting times, environmental degradation, urban stress. Very often, the worst side of this so-called economic crisis is not the crisis itself but the effects of the unfair policies that have been deployed. For this reason, in recent times the global crisis appears to have awakened the social unrest that seemed to have been dormant in a welfare state that

once was perceived as everlasting. Today, the very same cities that keep their discourse as motors of economic growth and as strategic nodes of capital concentration have increasingly become the centres of protest and resistance as the many urban mobilizations all over the world demonstrate during 2011 and 2012. The aim of this chapter is therefore to explore this urban discontent by analysing the potential of urban spaces as sites of generation of alternatives to the social and political crisis. To do this, I will base my argument on the many contributions from the critical urban theory that have recently reworked some of Henri Lefebvre's ideas on the urban process, urban centrality and the right to the city.

1. THE RIGHT TO THE (IMAGINED) CITY

Let us start with the evidence of how neo-liberal policies generate growing social and spatial inequalities. Any analyses of the evolution of a variety of social indicators in the last ten years in most western cities would show that the gap between the richest and the poorest has widened. For the less privileged it can be an extreme economic situation without the minimum means necessary to guarantee their basic needs. For the middle classes, who during the years of economic growth lived a "golden age" of high consumption – and also of high indebtedness –, it has meant a progressive impoverishment and a drastic reduction of their consumption levels, which is assumed to be both a symptom and a cause of the recession.

Austerity is indeed a very aggressive way of doing politics, the last facade that neo-liberal politics uses to undermine the basis of a welfare state that was created to save the system but that in the end turned out to be too expensive and inefficient for capital's interests. Capitalism has already shown many times its capacity to restructure and to survive even at the cost of the use of violence and of unbearable human suffering. But unjust, violent and intolerable as it is, alternatives to capitalism have become less and less imaginable, especially for the left. It was Neil Smith who stated that "the tragedy is less the political onslaught by the right than the political non-response of the left" (Smith, 2009:51). A couple of examples can evoke the state of mind of some leftist intellectuals. It was Fredric Jameson who echoed the idea that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson, 2003:76). Moreover, in any case, one may wonder how a non-capitalist world would be? And

it was Donna Haraway who openly complained about having almost lost her capacity to imagine such a different world (quoted in Smith 2009:51).

Such a collective incapacity could leave us in a difficult situation for thinking about alternatives. A possible hint takes us back to the urban ground. Back in 1968, Henri Lefebvre wrote that capitalism could not be understood nor resisted without understanding and re-imagining the city (Lefebvre, 1974). This was a bold statement made by someone who firmly believed that the city was nothing but an abridged model of society as a whole. There is no question that studying cities from a critical perspective means to contextualize the process of urbanization in the present form of capitalism. And similarly, following Lefebvre's train of thought, the urban must be a key element to understanding the contradictions of capitalism. Thus, fighting for a new city (for the right to the city as Lefebvre would say) inevitably means fighting for a new society. But we need to be able to at least think of it, to be able to imagine it. Hence, we urgently need to use the right to imagine the city, another city, another society.

Our first step to inspire such imagination could be then to unmask the neo-liberal ideology, to look for the creation of some rupture in this hegemonic neo-liberal discourse. Thatcher's famous (or infamous) "there is no alternative" narrative, like it or not, went directly against our imagination since it is difficult to counter any discourse based on the same logic that supports it. The necessary rupture can only be created from other values and logic than the ones that support the neo-liberal discourse, that is, from the values and logic of the materially lived-in space and not from economic abstractions.

Let us discuss now for a moment the common hegemonic discourses on cities. The usual aims pursued by city governments have been the adjustment of urban space to their potential demands, transforming some areas in a frantic and sometimes ephemeral way, and converting them into a commodity ready to be sold. Urban politics and urban planning have been rapidly adapted to these new priorities and selling the city has become a normal item on the agenda since the 1980s. But besides producing the commodity (adapting spaces), urban marketing experts would say one needs to sell them, find potential consumers, position the merchandise in the market, and compete with other possible alternatives. This is about promoting and expanding urban qualities, availabilities, comparative advantages and about finding ways to do it (Harvey, 1989). But when citizens realize that their needs lie outside such commercial

logics, then the only thing that can be sold to them in order to maintain the necessary social harmony is ideology: to persuade them that the decisions are beneficial to everybody, that they serve the principle of the common good. The weight of urban discourses has thus inevitably become heavier: what is said that it is done, what is said that it is, what is said that is wanted, are all part and parcel of "what is done" to occupy a better position in this international context and at the same time a way to try to convince everyone that this is the correct and only path to be followed. For many years, this hegemonic discourse on the city succeeded in stopping the emergence of alternatives, transgressions and resistances to that "imposed point of view" as Sharon Zukin once put it (Zukin, 1995:23-24). Thus the right to the city must also be about having a "different point of view", about envisioning the city as a space for living, as having use value and not only as exchange value. The right to the city must start with the right to the (imagined) city.

2. Questioning the hegemonic common sense

It is nothing new to say that power uses every possible means to reach its goals. And language, if properly used and amplified, can be very powerful in creating "truths" and make any other different explanation look unreasonable and even ridiculous. The main strategy used by the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse is to describe the situation as being so far away from any personal experience we may have that it is actually very difficult, almost impossible to counter. Moreover, when said discourse, often unintelligible and therefore practically unquestionable, seems not to be enough, it is immediately added that, anyway, "there are no alternatives". With the never-ending echo of the media and the complicity of intellectuals, neo-liberal ideology creates in this way a hegemonic "common sense" that naturalises all kind of decisions as unavoidable and undermines all possibilities of resistance to that extremely critical situation.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, it can be said that those strategies, when looked at closely, are not very sophisticated after all. They consist of blaming people (guilty for being too indebted, guilty for having lived beyond their means, guilty for having a job so they don't have the right to protest, guilty for not having a job and being a burden on the entire

society, guilty for being ill, guilty for demanding care for kids and old people instead of personally taking care of them…), in being confused (a situation too complicated to be explained to ordinary people, use of lies or euphemisms like "healing or recapitalizing or injecting liquidity standing for giving public money to private banks), or creating a state of collective fear by threats or even repression if needed (Valverde, 2013).

However, despite an unemployment rate that seem out of control[1] and growing levels of poverty, there is an increasing perception among people that the no- alternatives discourse is actually hiding a reality of public resources spent in benefit of financial capital and the already very rich (Peet, 2012). This growing perception cannot be said to be a counter-discourse since it is not so well organised but it does indeed open an important fracture in this incapacity to respond to this direct alliance between economic and political power. Looking to open fractures to this common sense was the objective of Doreen Massey's 2011 paper called precisely "Ideology and Economics at the present moment". In that paper we were urged to think of the relations between economy and ideology in some other way if we were to fight the neo-liberal space. Massey was of course talking from and for London but lots of things she talked about are perfectly applicable to other contexts (paradoxically, the magic of theorizing from the ground up that has always characterized Massey's thought). For Massey a real space seemed to exist for an effective answer and to produce any breaks to that hegemonic ideological common sense considering three areas of potential engagement. These areas are: 1) considering the economy with a completely different prioritisation of values (one that stresses the cooperation needed in social reproduction instead of the exchange in markets), 2) putting equality back on the agenda and into the discourse (as opposed to the neo-liberal stress on liberty), and 3) reinforcing the collective self-organization of people in relation to growing individualism.

With these three possibilities in mind, we move from the abstract and ideological to the personal and political, where we address the effects of the crisis in the urban spaces where the abstract explanations of the

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1 | The unemployment rate in Spain is over 25%, in Barcelona it's "only" over 15% although the rate in the worst neighbourhood can often double that in the best one, not to mention the scandalous rates of youth unemployment all over the country that are currently over 50%.

neo-liberal discourse have now a material and real form: people at risk of losing their house, people who cannot satisfy their basic needs, people who are tired of growing waiting times, people who get demoralized with their progressive worsening of the conditions of their life. Put another way, what it is hidden by global neo-liberal ideology is indeed shown in space.

3. FROM GLOBAL DISCOURSE TO EVERYDAY LIFE: THE SCALES OF THE URBAN

Merrifield has sensibly pointed out how easily we identify the dominant role of financial capitalism in the global neo-liberalism and at the same time how easily we accept the idea that "the urban" is the natural place to contest the neo-liberal project, as the wide-ranging and relevant social movements at the present time show (Merrifield, 2013). For decades, we had witnessed with some puzzlement at first, then with much avidity to understand, a systematic oblivion of the "urban scale" in the claims of social movements. In the so-called new social movements, there has been a change in the goals and ways of organising but also a change in the scale of the issues they are concerned by. Complaints move very naturally from the smaller local (my house, my street) to the global (third world debt, environmental crisis, super exploitation of labour etc.) skipping that urban scale than once was so characteristic of social movements (as described, for example, in Castells, 1983). Notwithstanding this change of priorities, the city has forcefully remained as the place for the expression of complaints and protests. Andy Merrifield again gives a possible answer: "It is too vast, because the scale of the city is out of reach for most people living at street level; yet it is too narrow as well, because when people do protest and take to the streets *en masse*, they frequently reach out beyond the scale of the city. What is required is something closer to home—something one can touch and smell and feel—*and* something larger than life, something world-historical: a praxis that can somehow conjoin both realms at once" (Merrifield, 2011:108).

Again Lefebvre provides a framework of how to conceptualise the question in his notion of social totality, this is, society as formed by three levels of socio-spatial reality: the global, the urban, and the quotidian (Lefebvre, 1983). For him, revolution should be based on the possibility that

the quotidian acts over the urban and the urban over the global although they should not be seen as separated scales but simultaneous ones. The big episodes of social fights against capitalism have not only been political events but revolutions of the urban space and of daily life; changing the world has meant changing the way that every day we live our daily life (Goonewardena, 2012). And although not comparable to Lefebvre's big cases such as May 68 in Paris or the Commune in Paris in 1871, the occupy movement fits very well into this new definition of social movement and also in Lefebvre's idea of taking urban space and the will to change the way we live our daily life. However, even though these are exciting and in some way "new" movements, our former question still remains: whatever happened to the urban scale as the target of protest at the moment when it seems that urban inequalities are growing even faster? The distinction between "the city" and "the urban" that Lefebvre so decisively stated and that has been retaken so convincingly by the urban critical theory is a key issue to answer (Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Merrifield, 2013). Despite its "tenacity", the city concept has been superseded by a changing reality to the point that it has become practically useless in many senses. A good strategy here is the idea to approach the city not as a category of analysis but as a category of practice, not as a place but as a process (Wachsmuth, 2014).

4. THE RIGHT TO (CENTRALITY AT) THE MARGINS

One of the key aspects of Lefebvre's thought is the notion of "implosion-explosion" that has also been redeployed to analyse the re-scaling of neo-capitalist forms of urbanization. (Brenner, 2000:369). The capitalist process of urbanization constantly destroys and creates urban centres to create generate new forms of urban centrality and peripheries (what I call here margins to escape from a geometrical determinism). This is a crucial point. It means that centres created by capital by definition generate new peripheries or margins left without necessary urban qualities such as accessibility, connectivity, quality of the spaces of encounter, a good urban image... Thus, in creating such new centralities, spatial inequalities are also created. The state always works in favour of mobilizing space as a productive force (planning, investment, infrastructures) and, under particular conditions, it becomes the mediator of such inequalities,

regulating the worst effects of socio-spatial polarization and preserving social cohesion (Brenner, 2000). However, in the present neo-liberal context, public intervention focuses exclusively on the forms of capitalist centrality, leaving aside its mediating role (thus leading to the austerity discourse for the poor). Abandoned spaces are those with less capacity to generate profit. David Harvey, basing himself on Rosa Luxembourg's theories on imperialism, stated in his well-known thesis on "accumulation by dispossession" that capitalism needs to exploit non-capitalist territories to survive or, in other words, that capitalism perpetually needs something " outside itself" to survive as a system" (Harvey 2003:137). Harvey applies this idea, this time following Marx directly, to the notion of the creation a reserve army of labour (capitalism would expel workers outside the system to be able to use them later). The same logic can be applied to urban spaces: central spaces –this is, spaces of capital accumulation – need non central spaces as reserve spaces for future needs of expansion (Tello, 2005). Around the centres, Lefebvre would say, there are only subjugated, exploited and dependent spaces. These reserve urban spaces are in many senses "colonized spaces" with their own symbolic codes, their diverse forms of resistance, all of which is rendered invisible and dismissed (and if needed, repressed) for the sake of the colonizer, this is, the capital. In other words, centres and peripheries are immanent to accumulation of capital, immanent to the secondary circuit of capital. The more profitable locations are squeezed while the rest are of disinvestment (Merrifield 2011).

Capitalist urban dynamics always creates by definition social and spatial inequalities, in moments of expansion and creation of new central areas (with episodes of serious urban violence against individual and collective spaces of existing residents, as Neil Smith so positively theorized (Smith 1996) but also during times of crisis (with disinvestment in non-central areas, this is, without regulating the extreme effects of the polarization that is inherent to the functioning of the system). In the last decade, we have witnessed these two extreme situations and in both cases, there has been one single ideology although with different discourses. Until the outbreak of the crisis in 2007-08, the voracity of capital was obvious in massive urban transformations where the profit expectations were high. It involved the destruction of collective spaces and often involved the rendering invisible and criminalization of entire neighbourhoods while owners were responsible for vicious episodes of

mobbing. The general discourse was nevertheless of extreme optimism: it was about opportunities for economic growth that benefited "the city" and that would eventually trickle down positive effects for everybody. After 2008, optimism has been replaced by the growing pessimism of inaction both in the private and in the public sector because of the lack of expectations or the lack of money to invest. However, the political action continues attached to the discourses of urban competitiveness (paving the way for private investment to levels that would have been considered unacceptable, at least on paper, until recently) and renewed urban discourses of growth that respond to the same ideology (urban regeneration, creative cities, smart cities).

In those areas, which we have called "urban margins", one can see more clearly the social effects of rising social inequalities and also where disinvestment and being rendered invisible points to a growing spatial injustice. In many ways, all complaints made from the margins are but a cry to become central, not with those centrality features that feed capital accumulation, but at the service of an improved urban collective life: "You cannot forge an urban reality (...) without the existence of a centre (...) without the actual or possible encounter of all 'objects' and 'subjects'" (Lefebvre 1976:18-19 quoted in Marcuse, 2011:19).

Centrality is therefore the essential feature of the urban and thus, it is necessary to redefine it in order to formulate alternatives. In "The Urban Revolution" Lefebvre argues that if the dialectic explosion/implosion characterizes the various manifestations of centrality that are created and destroyed, overcoming the process of creative destruction of late capitalism will involve the emergence of a "higher form of centrality" until the reaching of a radically new "space of encounter" (Goonewardena, 2011). In other words, the right to the city of Henri Lefebvre would not be anything but a "right to centrality" (Merrifield 2012).

5. ANOTHER BARCELONA URBAN LAB

"Barcelona Urban Lab" is the name of one of the projects of the 22@ Barcelona municipal company designed to consolidate Barcelona's role as an innovative city through which "companies with innovative projects can test their infrastructures and services for the future in a real

environment"[2]. However, perhaps we can also think of some other ways to use the city as "an urban laboratory". We would like to think of it as a place to check the creation of centralities and as a space of resistance where experiments of counter-neoliberalisation are produced and can be assessed. At first sight, it may be somewhat shocking trying to look for growing urban polarization in an apparently successful case of urban management such as Barcelona. At the beginning of the 1980s, Barcelona was not even on the map, as proudly stated by current political leaders to highlight the international recognition achieved since then. In 30 years, the city has indeed experimented a profound urban transformation that had been widely acclaimed by politicians, journalists and not least by academics. The hegemonic discourse was one of an urban model that had presumably found the magic formula of being simultaneously capable of satisfying investors and citizens, foreigners and local people, a recipe that was able to combine economic promotion with social cohesion (Benach and Albet, 2005; Benach, 1993, 2004). The brand "Barcelona model" was used to legitimate the diverse interests involved in this process of urban transformation and at the same time to promote the city internationally but that, in the end became a taken for granted myth that did not need to prove its very existence. During the 1990s only a few realized what was going on (Benach, 1993; Lopez, 1993; Tello, 1993) and the bulk of critical visions did not appear until much later, when the problems generated by such transformations became rather obvious (Capel, 2005; Delgado, 2007; Unio Temporal d'Escribes, 2004). It can be said that such a model started showing its limitations precisely from the very moment it worked according to their objectives, and contradictions rapidly arose. In the process of stimulating the entry of capital and people (tourist), tensions, conflicts and inequalities were more and more visible (i.e. high rocketing housing prices, limited maintenance of public spaces, urban pressure on popular neighbourhoods, loss of memory and social spaces...) while the public sector was diminishing its mediating role to compensate for inequalities and polarization. The glossy city of the tourist guides had definitely another more complex and not always so bright side. After 2008, the social situation has become more dramatic with rising levels of unemployment, with many people overly indebted (with immoral figures of evictions) and visible poverty in many parts of the city.

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2 | http://www.22barcelona.com/content/view/698/897/lang,en/

What we have been able to see in the last 30 years of urban regeneration is that renewed areas (new centralities) have always created new margins around them as reserved spaces waiting for a new round of investments. These areas are being left aside on purpose, stigmatised or rendered invisible as if nothing had ever existed there (Benach and Tello, 2013). The economic crisis suddenly stopped most real estate investments but also public expenditure was dramatically blocked, and these areas, with no economic expectations and no urban visibility, became more and more irrelevant. At a time of crisis, these reserve spaces have become "anomalous spaces", they are not central nor they have any expectation to become so, they have plenty of problems and needs but there is no public money to invest, they are outside the system. However, residents in those areas have shown enormous capacity of resistance, organization and creation of new ways to face urban pressures in the past and in the present "nothingness", they have been able to read unusually well the global roots of daily situations.

In the last few years, we have seen at least three different kinds of responses. First, the progressive creation of a global counter-discourse that started affirming the possibility of alternatives with the slogan of "another world is possible" (and it is at least somewhat curious that because the proposed alternative does not please the powerful, it has been accused of not providing an alternative). This is the example of an urban movement with complaints that are able to clearly relate local, even personal, issues with global trends. Secondly, there has been a variety of openly spatial claims such as the defence of spaces of social interaction (for example, regaining public spaces from privatization projects with self-management forms of organization), the appropriation and production of space with collective aims (from community gardens to precarious occupations by the most excluded). And, finally, the important movements related with the needs of social reproduction in defence of basic rights have to be mentioned such as housing, education or public health care (in Spain these have been called "human tides" that identify themselves for the colour they wear in mass demonstrations).[3]

What is most interesting is that, in all three cases, this resistance show how the feasibility of the triple possibility stated by Massey, in which

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3 | A good account of these movements can be read in English in Méndez de Andés (2014).

cooperation, equality and self-organization show how to move, in a good lefebvrian sense, from the everyday space to the urban and to the global.

6. Conclusion: the right to rethink the right to the city

There is something interesting regarding these small-scale spatial initiatives that are often analysed with undoubted sympathy but as isolated cases with no real relevance. With some good sense they have been labelled as limited "experiments of counter-neoliberalization" (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore, 2011) that are insufficient to resist the tremendous attack to the rights of people (Harvey, 2012). There are, clearly, many dangers: to have no other consequences beyond themselves, to be repressed or destroyed, to be tamed or co-opted. Many authors have called to look farther, to work in another scale, to relate what goes one in the daily sphere with global processes for which we urgently need explanatory theories. However, others have asked for caution, to avoid building theories in the air for what happens on the ground. Merrifield has widely reflected on the difficulties and huge possibilities of bridging theory and daily life practices: "Theory can guide the latter [the action]: that is its acid test. But it can only do so if it articulates within it a discourse of daily life." (1997:419) And he goes further by putting the question on how to build such an articulation elaborating from Gramsci: "knowledge and feeling should and can mutually interlock and dialectically fuel each other" (1997:427)

He has forcefully argued that nobody mobilizes for a theory, and it could thus happen that a good theory could be hardly useful. This is the case, for Merrifield, of the almost unquestionable idea of "the right to the city" that is no longer working according to its initial objective. Even before it was made banal and depoliticised as Mark Purcell has shown so well (Purcell, 2013), it was probably too abstract an idea. Merrifield has almost proposed to abandon the idea of the right to the city, seeing the city as being too vast and at the same too narrow an idea to fit the scale of people's needs and expectations. And he has found some alternative in the same works of Lefebvre, in his notion of "spaces of encounter" which, if I understand him correctly, refers exactly to that notion of the new forms of centrality (Merrifield 2013). When the city has no defined shape nor limits, nor even a clear identity in a completely urbanized planet, and when the

forms of communication are increasingly virtual ones (Diaz Parra and Candon Mena, 2014) and facilitate new encounters, we should look at the emergence of new forms of encounters and new forms of spaces. Here is where rethinking the geographical scales as socially produced is most important, where spaces are crossed, the personal becomes collective, the daily life spaces become global and where these new forms of centrality can question the whole functioning of the capitalist process of urbanization.

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