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Shifting Urban Traditions and Modernities

Cities have some surprising aspects. On one hand they are, as Fernand Braudel points out, “Transformers and accelerators of changes”. This results, as Henri Lefebvre and more recently Manuel Castells note from their peculiar socio-spatial location as nodes articulating multiple regional and global flows and networks. The city is nothing special, except that it is where all comes together. The urban markets articulate the city with its hinterland, the country and the world markets. The administration brings together and connects through the city the different parts and regions of a nation, and the educational facilities from universities to primary schools provide access to global knowledge. Following Peter Hall this centrality, the articulation of diversities and that differences are brought together within a city, provides for the “innovative milieu” of the city.

To this spatial dimension of nodality of the city we have to add a time dimension: The city brings together past, present and future. In a very simple way, the articulation of past, present and future results already from the simple fact that a city is built environment. A city has been created in a more or less planned way through human practices, which implies that the construction of something new, requires that something old is demolished. Sometimes this demolition results from destructions during wars. Since antiquity up to the present, warfare always implied the destruction of the cities of the enemy with the understanding that once the cities are destroyed, the enemy will loose culture, morality and the ability as well as willingness to continue the fight. Disasters like floods, earthquakes, volcanoes are other destructors of cities, as well as fires, which occurred more or less regularly. Formerly these fires destroyed huge parts of the cities and thereby allowed for and required re-construction.

Keeping in mind the multiple vulnerabilities of disaster cities of cities, it is striking that nearly all city systems, be they more regional or global are already very old. In Southeast Asia we have, however, an interesting co-existence of old urban traditions and modernity resulting from colonialism. Urban traditions are either as what Wolters referred to as cities of inland states depending on peasant production or harbour principalities as nodes in international trading networks. The urban system of these cities dates back for 500 to 1.000 years. Cities like Hanoi, Ayudhya, Ava, Yogyakarta and Malakka etc., come to mind. Compared to these old cities of which most are located in fertile areas, the colonial cities are more recent. These were located in less fertile, often swampy regions close to the coast, as their function was to link the colonial region through exploitative networks to the respective colonial centres. Here we have cities like Singapore, Yangoon, Saigon/HCM and Batavia/Jakarta or Manila. While in the latter cities the colonial past forms the main urban tradition, in the former cities we can still recognise their historic, pre-colonial roles.

Here some data on Hanoi to be added

In his discussion of the semiotics of architecture, Eco distinguishes between a first function that refers to the direct uses of an architectural form and its secondary function, which is its associative, communicative meaning. This differentiation reminds of Marx discussion of the double aspect of commodities, there use-value on one hand and there exchange value on the other. These functions or values are not fixed but are often re-defined. A temple, which once was a centre of learning can turn into a memorial or museum. The residence of a colonial governor turns into a prime-ministers office after independence etc.

Urban Modernities:

In his study on “The Fall of Public Man”, Richard Sennett makes the polemical remark that for centuries past, cities have been constructed following clear and comprehensible meanings. The city was understood by its inhabitants. In other words, the communicative, associative meaning made sense. He continues that only during the last decades, when professional urban planning started, it seems that such a shared meaning has been lost. Looking at European and specially German cities from the fifties to the seventies, one main effort of re-building the cities after the destructions of the war, was to “modernize” them. One pre-dominant task in the fifties was to provide habitat. Especially in western Germany, housing was widely destroyed and many people homeless. Then millions of refugees without shelter had to be added. This was the time, when the blocks and new cities at the peripheries were built. Function was dominant. Unfortunately, this continued into the seventies. The old parts of the city were demolished to make space for new highways, offices, blocks etc. etc. In this course the cities lost most of its history and charm.

Today we can see the emergence of a global city-form. The ideas of urban planning and of course, of how a nice city should like have become standardized, probably not the least because the curricula for urban planning are quite similar in all universities. Especially large scale projects are usually planned and built by international architectural office and the taste, of what the customer likes, have as well become quite standardized. History of the specific city and cultures are reduced to mere emblems. An excellent example are the international hotel-chains, which are all the same but different!

Besides this, global market oriented rebuilding of cities, we have international organizations addressing the problems of cities, not the least because these are quite similar world wide. One is marginalization and the rise of slums. In fact, Davis envisions a “planet of slums”. Then there are the problems of supply of a city with water, and how to get this out again. Of food etc. as well as traffic congestion and so forth. Sometimes these problems are made into negative visions of an urban catastrophe. Interestingly, the positive and negative planning visions have in common their focus on technical, instrumental aspects of urbanism. That a city is made of citizen is thereby often forgotten. There is a reason to this. Technical solutions can be planned, and it is expected that good solutions, kind of automatically lead to a better life in the city. Furthermore, technical solutions are based on expertise, while it is assumed that most people living in a city do not have the proper expertise. Here a kind of parallel to a car is implied. Nearly of those driving and using a car have no idea how it works. We all rely on technicians to repair it. Well designed and built cars make the user happy. They do what is expected. Why should this not be valid for cities as well?

The technical focus of urban development follows a capitalist valorisation of knowledge. Development, like other cultural, religious and political movements or discourses on change are linked to promises of a better life. Only with such implicit promises do these movements have reason and meaning. In this context instruments, technologies etc. have a clear advantage to religions, who postpone deliverance to a later life, or cultural movements, which always demand suffering. Technologies do fulfil promises to quite a large degree more or less to the satisfaction of most people, as they increase agency to a very high degree. Thereby technologies can legitimize themselves with their success.

Technologies and instruments are closely connected to utility and incentives and thus to economics. In the combination of economy and technology both are dis-embedded and produce their own aims and objectives in the sense of more (growth), better, faster etc. The question why more is better, is basically a political and moral question, and thus outside of technological development and the economy. Modern economics, based on the paradigms of utility maximization and incentives are the most explicit expression of these self-defining dynamics. Rationality is utility maximisation and behaviour follows incentives. Development has therefore to proceed via such incentives. In addition, technologies as well as economics allow for modelling, simulation and calculability. Based on the proper models, effects can be analysed and function as base for political decision making. The basics are undisputed. As little as gravity is an issue for public discussion, the working of the economy is beyond such a discussion. Discussion is limited to experts over the most appropriate model that will represent reality best.

With the rise of technologies and liberal economics, the dissolution of space and thereby globalization is possible, together with the rise of global organisations like development organisations. They follow the logic of instrumental rationality to which self evident and self-legitimizing objectives in terms

of development visions like f.e. the millennium goals, are added, which can hardly be disputed by anyone. As Castells points out, “the more organisations depend, ultimately, upon flows and networks, the less they are influenced by the social contexts associated with the places of their location. From this follows a growing independence of the organisational logic from the societal logic: a trend that we could call ‘bureaucratisation’ in the Weberian sense, that is, the predominance of the rationality of means over the rationality of goals.” (Castells 1991:170).

The advantages of instrumental rationality are obvious. However, do the techniques deliver the goods, or fulfil promises in the urban context? For Lefebvre (1972, 1976, 1991) industrialisation and urbanisation are two sides of the same process, i.e. the development of capitalism. Industrialisation characterises the instrumental aspect, the incredible development of technologies, while urbanisation is linked to the social component, giving industrialisation its reason and thereby relativating social relations and domination. As much as the dominance of nature through instrumental rationality became the tool for governing society, urbanisation has been subjugated under the constraints of industrial production. (Lefebvre 1972:188). However, the city is not structured from instrumental rationality as the term “human settlement” connotes, but it is a centre of interactions, of exchange, of articulations. There remains a structural resistance of the city towards pure instrumentality and functionality. What is functional works very well in a factory, but who wants to live in a factory?

A brief look at current affairs indicates how little the cities are tamed and chained by technologies. The difficulties if not impossibility for urban planning is obvious in all larger cities. As maintained in the Habitat report 2001: „Cities are strategic sites and will become even more so – sites for global interests seeking to maximize profit, but they are also sites where local grassroots and civil society develop new claims to assert their rights to liveable urban places“ (Habitat 2001:75)

The urban challenges:

Certainly, the technical dimension of cities is of crucial relevance. However, as historical sources and current evidence shows, much of the urban infrastructure is closely connected to local activities. A lot of the infrastructure is set up by the people themselves, especially in slum or marginal areas

without relevance to the urban administration.^[i] Much of the infrastructure provided by the municipalities is built due to popular demands and political pressures. Furthermore, many projects from buildings to streets, public transportation, communication and so-called private cities are provided by private enterprises. Thus the material development of any city results from multiple highly diverse activities and initiatives. The technologies are effects of rather than causes for urban development.

From a perspective of a sociology of development two aspects make the city, namely urbanism and civilisation. I define urbanism as the specific forms of institutionalization of how to cope with heterogeneity and multiple diversities. For this a public sphere is crucial. Thus as little as we can speak of city without

market, we can't speak of city without public life.^[ii] As Wuthnow indicates, both are often connected. Understanding institutionalization following Eisenstadt as a contested process, each city develops its own forms of urbanism. These are, however, generalized through the urban systems. The more this urban system has become a global city system, urbanism is alienating from the respective city and globalizing. At the same time within each city localized forms of urbanism evolve in combination and contrast to global urbanism. As a result global culture is predominantly urban culture. This has the double implication that cities in developing countries show similarities to cities in Western Europe or the US, as much as cities in Europe and the US display characteristics of third world cities. Here Soja (1989) points out: “Seemingly paradoxical but functionally interdependent juxtapositions are the epitomizing features of contemporary Los Angeles. Coming together here are especially vivid exemplifications of many different processes and patterns associated with the social restructuring of the late twentieth century. ... One can find in Los Angeles not only the high technology industrial complexes of the Silicon Valley and the erratic sunbelt economic of Houston, but also the far-reaching industrial decline and bankrupt urban neighbourhoods of rust-belted Detroit or

Cleveland. There is a Boston in Los Angeles, a lower Manhattan and a South Bronx, a Sao Paulo and a Singapore.“ (Soja 1989:193)

Cities are surprising resilient. The current urban system has been established on a world scale in the mid 19th century when the last colonial cities were founded. In regions with longer urban traditions, the city systems date back for centuries and most have survived several destructions, rises and declines. This requires that a rather high level of control of violence has been established. On one hand, violence is controlled through repression and supervision, but because external control remains limited, self-control is crucial for the survival of a city.

The pillars civilisation and public life which simultaneously make the city and are at its base have an impact on development endeavours. The public sphere as scrutinizing institution does not exclude development programmes, and their meaning and reason has to legitimize itself directly to those affected: the citizen. Consequently, the political moral dimension successfully dissolved in rural development has its re-entry and can hardly be ignored in urban development.

The limitations of technical approaches towards the city are best exemplified by functional architecture. The habitation designed by Corbusier which fulfils all technical requirements never were attractive to live in. Therefore immediately the inhabitants made modifications which were not functional at all, but obviously fulfilled requirements for everyday life by the inhabitants. Chandigar and Brasilia are the most explicit examples.

In the above definition of urbanism there is no reference to urban planning. Urban planning is definitely the most instrumental approach towards urban development. The plan attempts an efficient use of space satisfying the demands of the city and the citizen. ^[iii] With regards to urban planning especially of large cities one finds an astonishing discrepancy between articles, policies, training manuals etc. teaching proper planning techniques, and reflections about why the beautiful plans usually fail and/or are not followed. ^[iv] Without going into details, the planning illusion becomes obvious already when looking at some basic figures.

1. Cities with ten or more million inhabitants are larger than most states recognized by the United Nations. Thus if, as the example of the socialist countries indicates, national development plans tend to fail, then how could city plans work?
2. Large cities cannot be supervised. Even basic data collection is close to impossible simply due to the geographic and population size.
3. Even though the growth rate of large cities is usually small with 2 to 3%. However, 3 percent of 10 Million are 300.000. This means that each year a large city is added to the existing urban agglomeration. No administration and planning unit is able to cope with this. In Calcutta for example they are using satellite pictures to find out where new parts of the city emerged.
4. The diversity of cities makes it complicated to gather precise data that can be used as planning base. Furthermore, the rapidity of changes taking place can hardly be anticipated.
5. The planning of a city is a rather complex task. How could these tasks be handled by administrative units in developing countries that are defined by their lack of capacities? If it would be taken serious, we should definitely ask the Bangkok Municipality to do some training courses for capacity building to improve the planning of Bielefeld!

If planning is an illusion as much as administrative control and governance, but nevertheless, cities do work, and do function, then this results from the capacities of the citizen to organise themselves. Is there a need for technical development projects, and can the experts explain to the citizen how their city and quarters work? Planning can destroy cities, but I doubt that it can create urbanity.

An alternative modernity:

Urban planning as experts has been unable to solve urban problems significantly. As an addition to experts, why not take the competences and knowledge of the citizens into account?

The most crucial aspect of urban sustainability is the fact that it has to be based on a general accepted and negotiated consensus of goals and future visions (innovations, importance of the public sphere, civil society and habitat) for all people who live in the city. This idea of “Cities for Citizens” - to quote Douglass & Friedmann (1998) - refers to a consensus achieved through a democratic discourse and appropriation reminds of the agora, as the public centre of politics of the polis (Castoriadis 1990). Therefore, expertise have to be modified to allow participation concerning decisions about the future development of cities (Carley et al. 2001). To a “top-down” approach in which the administration makes decisions that have to be locally implemented, we have to add a „bottom up“ or „grass-root“ approaches.

Recently, new modes of inclusive governance, sustainability and citizen participation have become widely accepted in contemporary urban policy in Europe and across the world. Supranational organisations such as Habitat, the EU, World Bank and IMF all support this approach. This general recognition contrasts with its actual implementation in policies and projects. One reason might be that it demands to address not only the economic preconditions for development, but also the social preconditions in terms of community self-organisation and resilience (Stiglitz 1998).

Conclusion

In the study „The City and the Grass Roots“ Manuel Castells (1983: 302) forwarded the argument that the meaning of the city is not defined by urban sociologists, architects, geographers or urban planners but by society (and to a greater extent the global one) as a specific historical and social meaning: "Cities like all social reality are historical products, not only in their physical materiality but in their cultural meaning."

[\[i\]](#) These areas can be quite large as for example Lagos indicates. The administration cares rather little about what is going on in the city, and most of the infrastructure from wells, waste water disposal to electricity and roads are self made by those living in the areas.

[\[ii\]](#) Public life is at the base of the rise of the community of the Bürger as independent political unit. Market and public sphere are often connected as Wthnow indicates.

[iii]

With regards to urban planning it is astonishing that such plans are needed. If it is assumed that the market is the best means for the allocation of resources, then administrative plans and regulations should be irrelevant.

[iv]

Looking at urban planning of Bielefeld in the late sixties the differences are obvious. In many cases, it is rather fortunate that these plans failed!