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## HOUSING IDENTITIES: AT THE ROOTS OF PRESENT-DAY BELONGING'S UNEASINESS<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The paper assesses housing as a global issue affecting wide sectors of societies not just in less developed countries. Trends and cases show the crucial role that building industry cycles have played in the *financialization of the economy* and its speculative side effects, even in sectors presented as alternatives to mainstream production, as the *sharing economy*. We are, therefore, experiencing a radical change today in the meanings attached to terms like *city*, *identity*, *rights*, and growing inequalities affecting ever-larger shares of the population. When the fundamental human right to housing is denied the social bonds and trust on which citizenship relies is lost.

**KEYWORDS:** *housing, social space, belonging, Mediterranean, neoliberal city*

### I. HOUSING REVISITED

Housing is a slippery issue. It is the typical subject easily doomed to be underrated, even in the long aftermath of the 2008 crisis: a subject at once too technical to be publicly discussed in full knowledge of the facts while deeply affecting people's lives, radically putting into question social bonds and the very heart of the sense of belonging and citizenship, as in the case, strictly related, of labour<sup>2</sup>.

Besides, housing is at the crossroads of a lot of crucial issues, so it is an appropriate touchstone for an interdisciplinary dialogue – a vital character of iASK milieu – involving, as it were, the two riverbanks ('hard' and 'soft') of the knowledge's stream. In this regard, it is ironic (and disappointing) that, already in the early sixties, John Burchard, in writing the conclusions to an important

<sup>1</sup>The present essay, written while being recipient of a iASK Research Scholarship in 2019, has also benefited of the stimulating discussions with the interdisciplinary research group *Urban Forms of Life* of the University of Rome - La Sapienza (Department of Philosophy, Department of Architecture and Design) coordinated by Stefano Velotti, and, of course, of the constant, enriching, friendly dialogue with Giorgio Mangani and Orville Pantaleoni of the Lab LABIRINTO.

<sup>2</sup> Castells' statement about labour ("in modern societies, paid working time structures social time", Castells, 1996: 468-70) can be complemented by claiming that housing, in its turn, structures social space.

collection of essays concerning the city as historical subject could plainly affirm that “all the world tries to be interdisciplinary” [Handlin and Burchard, 1963: 251]. A firmly held belief not so popular nowadays among academic bureaucracies.

The line of reasoning that I will develop is the following:

- the first part is an assessment of housing as a global issue, affecting wide sectors of societies not just in less developed countries, as far as households' chances to make a decent living are concerned. Some trends and cases are taken into account, showing the crucial role that building industry cycles have played in the *financialization of the economy* and its speculative effects, even in sectors presented as an alternative way to the mainstream, as the *sharing economy*. Notwithstanding we are experiencing a radical change today, in terms of the meanings attached to terms like *city*, *identity*, *rights*, the growing inequalities affecting ever-larger shares of the population, still lie along the same fault lines of old edges, while new phenomena are emerging along other edges;
- the second part will focus on the consequences of such change on the ways people perceive their attachment to the places they live in, as an integral part of the stuff of which the basic glue of any social bond is made: *trust*. If intended spatially, when the fundamental human right to housing (as dwelling and sociality) is denied the social bonds on which citizenship relies end up in tatters, and the supposed isomorphism between *space* and *sociability* is nothing but a ghost.

### 1.1 Housing Back in the Spotlight

First and foremost, the *global* character of the housing's issue must be asserted and cannot be overstated, despite the *local* different contexts, requiring specific solutions.

The shift to what has been called the “neoliberal city” [Hackworth, 2007; Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez, 2002; Theodore, Peck and Brenner, 2011] has represented a global transition, involving left-wing as well as right-wing governments started with the crisis of the Fordist (the city of production) and Keynesian (the city of consumption) models of urbanism in the '70s [Farinelli, 2018: 197].

The oil crisis of 1973 triggered then the neoliberal wave which, notwithstanding the mainstream association with the end-of-the-state claim – so popular in the aftermath of the Fall of Berlin Wall –, actually was the “fix” to the new accumulation cycle [see below, 1.2]:

Because of the reduction of national interventions in housing, local infrastructure, welfare, and the like, localities are forced either to finance such areas themselves or to abandon them entirely. Eric Swyngedouw has deemed this

larger process “glocalization”, as it involves a simultaneous upward (to the global economy and its institutions) and downward (to the locality and its governance structures) propulsion of regulatory power previously held or exercised by the nation-state. Given its geographically and temporally contingent nature, however, this process has affected different national contexts in different ways (...). The rollback/destruction of Keynesian interventions and the roll-out/creation of more proactively neoliberal policies are thus highly contingent, incremental, uneven, and largely incomplete. The resultant policy landscape is highly segmented—geographically and socially—and almost randomly strewn with concentrations of Keynesian artifacts (such as public housing) alongside roll-out neoliberal policies (such as workfare) in different places and in different stages of creation or destruction. Thus, while it is useful to suggest that policy ideas in North America and Europe are increasingly dominated by a unified, relatively simple set of ideas (neoliberalism), it is just as clear that the institutional manifestation (mainly through policy) of these ideas is highly uneven across and within countries [Hackworth, 2007: 12].

Housing so is a revealing litmus test of the failure of the much-heralded markets’ ‘natural’ capacity of guaranteeing freedom and equity, which through international institutions like WB or IMF has ensured the mindless adoption of neoliberal recipes as an undisputed orthodoxy, as articles of faith, all over the world.

It is not by chance then that the urban sustainable development goal of the UN includes the target 11.1, ensuring access for all citizens to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services by 2030 [EC 2016] and that access to adequate housing is also the focus of one of the partnerships in the Urban Agenda for the EU<sup>3</sup>, or that in 2016, UN special rapporteur on adequate housing, Leilani Farha, in partnership with United Cities and Local Government and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights launched ‘The Shift’, a global movement bringing together all levels of governments, civil society, different institutions and academia to reclaim the fundamental human right to housing<sup>4</sup>.

Housing has turned out to be a problem so great, that cities are taking action either individually or, more often, in-network, even taking a stand against tourism impact: an industry that, for many of them, represent one of (if not the) most substantial items of their budget revenue.

In July 2018, in a joint statement to the United Nations, the cities of Amsterdam, Barcelona, London, Montreal, Montevideo, New York and Paris

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/housing>.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.unhousingrapp.org/the-shift>.

declared that citizens' rights to affordable housing are being jeopardised following the growing influence of speculators, investors and mass tourism on the urban property market<sup>5</sup>.

Besides, another mainstream practice, the so-called *sharing economy* – meant originally to increase and enhance the experience of contact between residents and tourists – has been turning into a huge problem for municipalities, in the case of its most renowned and impressively expanding success story: Airbnb.

My colleagues from Siena University<sup>6</sup> have been monitoring in the recent years the phenomenon. Just to give some clue about a situation more and more affecting small places (which are more vulnerable to such logic):

- inequality is extremely high in all the cities in the report, and is constantly increasing in the vast majority of cities examined;
- in most cities a handful of operators listing several properties are capable of amassing more than two-thirds of the total revenues generated on the website;
- real estate agencies often use front men to concentrate in disguise property for short-term rent (useless for workers or students: today in Bologna is quite impossible for students to find an affordable rent within the city walls);
- ten European municipalities (Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, Barcelona, Bruxelles, Bordeaux, Munich, Kraków, Valencia, Wien) wrote a letter to the EU Commission asking for an urgent debate over Airbnb affecting affordable housing in historic centres. The letter was also caused by a recent opinion of the Advocate General of the European Court of Justice, claiming that Airbnb is a platform for digital services not a real estate agency, then it is not obliged to force its customers to comply with the local fiscal laws.

While there has been progress since 2008 with regard to the Europe 2020 objectives on climate change and energy, education and more recently, access to employment, the objectives of fighting poverty and social exclusion remain completely out of reach. More than one person in three in OECD countries is economically vulnerable, lacking sufficient liquid financial assets to maintain their living standard above the poverty threshold for at least three months.

Anyway, in the EU overall, the share of GDP devoted to social protection has increased slightly, from 25.9% of GDP in 2008 to 28.2% in 2016. But, when it comes

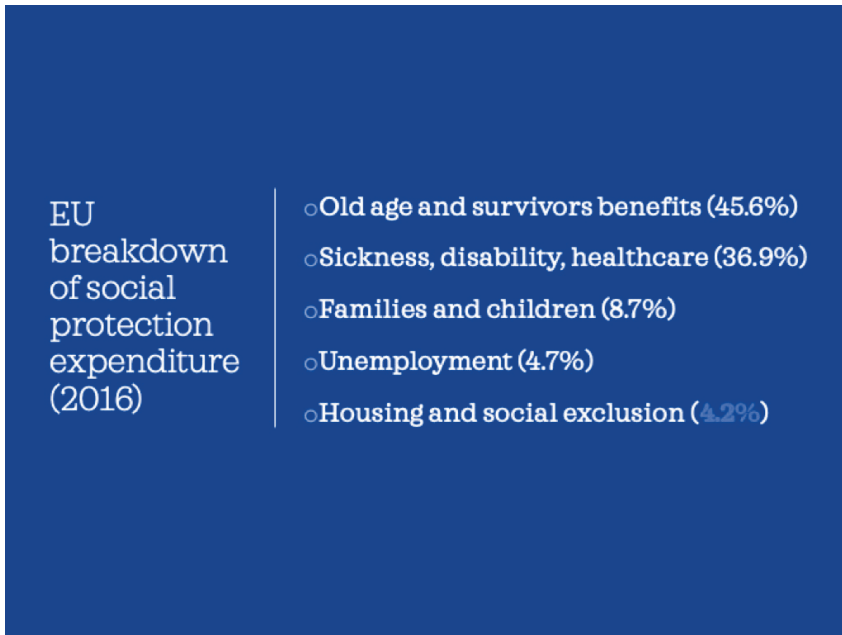
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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://citiesforhousing.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://ladelstlab.it/maps/73/the-airification-of-cities-report>.



to the composition of expenditure, in 2016, 45.6% of social protection expenditure in the EU was spent on old age and survivors benefits, 36.9% on sickness, disability and healthcare, 8.7% on families and children, 4.7% on unemployment and just 4.2% on housing and social exclusion (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1. EU breakdown of social expenditure in 2016 (Source: Eurostat)**

Housing expenditure is taking up increasing amounts of household budgets, particularly in poor households. Despite improvements in the material condition of housing across the EU, unfit housing continues to affect the quality of life of many Europeans, particularly the most vulnerable (Fig. 2).



(Source: FEANTSA -Fondation Abbé Pierre)

**TABLE 1**  
**HOUSING COST OVERBURDEN RATE**  
**2017**

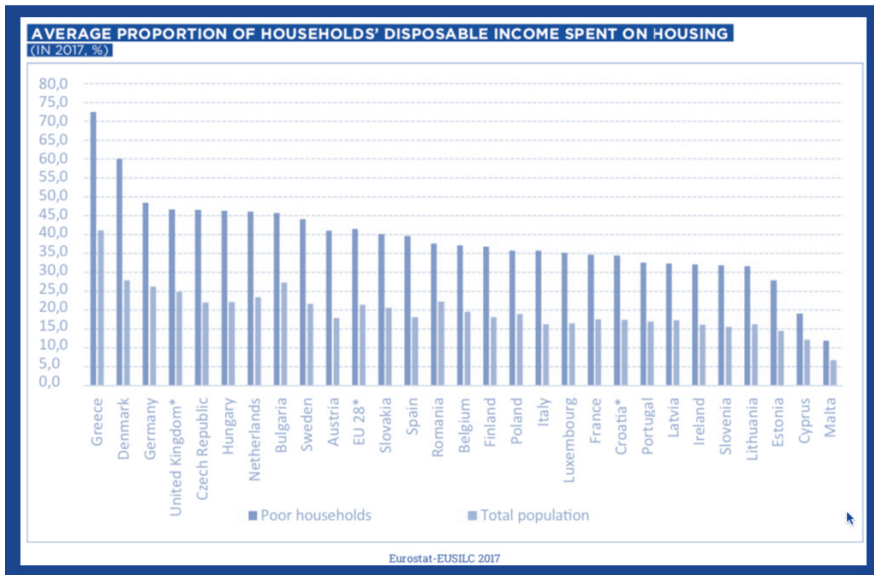
Country	POOR HOUSEHOLDS		TOTAL POPULATION	
	2017 (%)	2007-2017 change	2017 (%)	2007-2017 change
Greece	88.7	+37.2%	39.6	+180.6%
Denmark	75.4	+30.0%	15.7	+17.2%
Bulgaria	60.1	-11.6%	18.9	-10.8%
Hungary	49.4	+26.7%	10.7	-1.8%
Germany*	48.5	+14.9%	14.5	0.0%
Czech Republic	44.2	+13.9%	8.7	-15.5%
The Netherlands	40.9	-31.8%	9.4	-48.0%
United Kingdom*	40.8	-10.7%	12.4	-23.9%
Austria	40.3	+26.3%	7.1	+10.3%
Slovenia	38.9	-23.6%	8.4	-52.8%
Sweden	38.8	-19.0%	8.4	+5.3%
EU 28*	38.0	+12.2%	10.4	-3.7%
Luxembourg	37.4	+62.6%	10.0	+156.4%
Spain	36.5	+36.2%	9.8	+18.1%
Romania	36.3	-18.6%	12.3	-37.6%
Belgium	34.4	-11.6%	9.1	-9.9%
Italy	32.9	+25.6%	8.2	+5.3%
Poland	30.4	-8.2%	6.7	-36.2%
Lithuania	26.8	+33.3%	7.2	+50.0%
Slovenia	26.7	+20.3%	5.2	+4.0%
Croatia*	26.2	-45.9%	5.5	-58.9%
Portugal	26.0	+58.2%	6.7	-8.5%
Latvia	25.6	-19.2%	6.9	-30.3%
France	20.1	+9.8%	4.7	-17.5%
Ireland	19.9	+61.8%	4.5	+45.2%
Estonia	18.4	-3.2%	4.8	-7.7%
Finland	18.2	-0.8%	4.3	-8.5%
Cyprus	10.3	+41.1%	2.8	+64.7%
Malta	5.6	-45.1%	1.4	-44.0%

\* United Kingdom: Data breaks in 2017. \* EU: Germany & Croatia: 2009-2017 change

**Figure 2. Housing as a factor of poverty in 2019**

In 2017, European Union households spent more than EUR 2,000 billion on 'housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuel' (i.e. 13.1% of the EU's GDP). Of all these areas of spending, housing has seen the biggest increase over the last ten years (ahead of spending on transport, food, health, communications, culture, education, etc.): households spent 24.2% of their total expenditure on housing in 2017, an increase of 1.5 points compared to 2007.

In the majority of European Union countries, inequality has increased concerning housing expenditure: – in some countries (Denmark, Austria, Italy, France, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Portugal), the budget allocated to housing fell for the population as a whole between 2007 and 2017 but increased for poor households; – in other countries (Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, Ireland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Cyprus and Finland), this budget increased for all households, and poor households to a greater extent (Fig. 3) [Serme-Morin, Coupechoux, 2019].



(Source: FEANTSA -Fondation Abbé Pierre)

**Figure 3. Average proportion of households' disposable income spent on housing in 2017**

The complexity of housing's issue is also emphasised by other markers of inequality, like the urban heritage in decay and/or unused.

Physical decay in housing estates today is matched by a lowering of social status and ethnic segregation. Especially in Western and Northern European cities, there is *spatial clustering* of social issues, with housing estates at the forefront since they provide affordable housing (when compared with other segments of the housing sector). Consequently, many housing estates have over time become troubling sites – generating social dysfunction, poverty, ethnic concentration and isolation [Baldwin Hess, Tammaru and van Ham eds, 2018: 7].

In all major cities, empty homes have become more and more a common trait, with Paris' 107,000 empty homes, New York City 318,831 vacant units in 2015, or Sydney, where 118,499 vacant units were counted in 2013. At the same time, there is a paradox concerning this growing amount of empty homes if contrasted with growing populations seeking accommodation and the amount of speculation that is not declining [Punwasi, 2017].

In Italy, there are over 740 thousand real estate structures in a state of neglect, including palaces, villas, ecclesiastical buildings, industrial facilities, 6 thousand kilometres of unused railways and about 1,700 stations, in addition to the high number of large public buildings, such as hospitals, barracks and sanatoriums no longer in use (Fig. 4).

State Of Use	In Use	Unused	Total
Kind Of Data	Number Of Buildings (In Absolute Values)		
Italy	13,709,245	743,435	14,452,680
North-West	3,127,967	136,122	3,264,089
North-East	2,690,098	95,619	2,785,717
Centre	2,344,913	95,73	2,440,643
South	3,389,542	248,226	3,637,768
Islands	2,156,725	167,738	2,324,463

(Source: Istat)

**Figure 4. Unused and neglected structures and buildings in Italy in 2019 (Source: Istat)**

## 1.2 The Art of Rent in a Global Perspective

To explain the role real estate and rent play in the neoliberal city, it is necessary to sum up the mechanism of accumulation crisis and the *Spatio-temporal fix* [Harvey, 1982, 2001a, 2001b, 2012; Arrighi, 2007, Jessop, 2004].

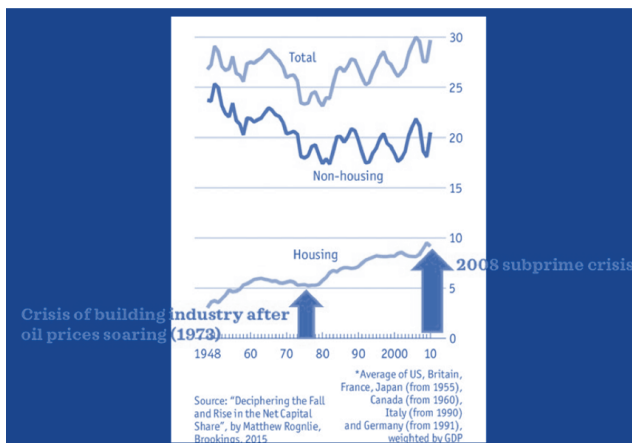
In a nutshell:

1. The capital needs to be *fixed in* and *on* the land to develop; at the same time, when it is successful, it needs to be freed to find new profitable places to avoid devaluation (*overaccumulation crises*), reinvesting the exceeding capital.
2. So, temporarily, the devaluation of capital caused by the overaccumulation crisis can be *time-shifted* or *spatially fixed*. Such a solution to crises is called *accumulation by dispossession*, i.e., the reinvestment of exceeding capital in new areas devaluating the original ones.
3. Both the *temporal shifting* and the *spatial fixing* not only produce just temporary solutions but deeply involve the human habitat. The devaluation of the previously fixed capital hit by disinvestment measures to open new profitable space will entail the devastation of the human habitat as well.

4. The neoliberal city has pushed such contradiction to the extreme:
  - a. Through the *financialization* of real estate,
  - b. and the downturn, decline, and devaluation of *public places*.

In the post-war period, developed economies have experienced two basic trends in the net capital share of aggregate income: the first, a rise during the last several decades, and a proportional fall continued until the 1970s. So, while the net capital share has increased since 1948, in disaggregating data it appears that such increase is basically from the housing sector, while the other sectors contributed very little or nothing at all. This means that the growth of wealth (above all of the richest minority) originated from the rising value of their property. As Rognlie [2015] pointed out, this is not due to the hoarding of properties in a few hands; but because the market value of the real estate has been growing over the last three decades (Fig. 5).

The push, particularly in the 2000s, towards "financialization" is a global phenomenon that, in the case, for example, of large pharmaceutical companies has generated the massive dislocation of investments intended for research in the direction of stock exchange operations aimed at increasing their equity value – in particular with the repurchase of own shares (*share buyback*) to increase their market value. Pfizer, for example, in 2011 repurchased its own shares for a value equivalent to 90% of its net profit and 99% of its R&D expenses; all while the state expenditure for research, direct or indirect, has been growing [Mazzuccato, 2018: 31-4].



(Source: *The Economist*, modified by the author)

**Figure 5. Evolution over time of net capital share of aggregate income in US, Britain, France, Japan, Canada, Italy, and Germany (1948-2010) compared with the housing's disaggregated data**

Besides, as emphasised by many authors (among them Harvey himself), “the value of property, especially the kinds of property that have risen most dramatically in value over the last thirty years, derives to a great extent from intangibles” [Haskel and Westlake, 2018: 166].

The fact is that today *culture* has been enlisted as an economic resource. As effectively summed up by David Harvey,

the knowledge and heritage industries, the vitality and ferment of cultural production, signature architecture and the cultivation of distinctive aesthetic judgments have become powerful constitutive elements in the politics of urban entrepreneurialism in many places (particularly Europe). The struggle is on to accumulate marks of distinction and collective symbolic capital in a highly competitive world. But this brings in its wake all of the localized questions about whose collective memory, whose aesthetics, and whose benefits are to be prioritized [Harvey, 2012: 106].

In the case of Mediterranean cities, through the promotion of international events like Olympic Games, World Cups, World Fairs, G8; urban renewal programmes concerning cities’ disused areas (like docklands) or considered in decay (like parts of historic centres; European programmes like the European Capital of Culture, we have witnessed a huge and enduring flow of public and private investments which radically has been transforming large areas of Mediterranean cities, on both shores, mostly led by the monopoly rent logic.

In all these cases, what Harvey calls “the art of rent” [Harvey cit.: 74-5, 100-5] is the very engine of change. Such programmes indeed, while enhancing decaying or unoccupied areas, through the spillover effect of the rent have increased nearby property prices in surrounding districts, so reducing affordable housing chances in favour of high-income residential lots and forcing the relocation of low-income residents [Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez, 2002].

Monopoly rent follows a logic which, while investing in concrete, material things, like buildings and infrastructures in localised areas, is anyway mainly linked to the financial market, whose very nature is global. To attract external investments, in the wake of neoliberal policies, cities have to accept competition on the international scale, then implementing big plans and urban developments radically changing not only areas somehow abandoned, but also all the neighbourhoods bordering the areas involved, rising dramatically real estate prices, so expelling not-affluent residents and small economic activities, and, above all, attracting all the tourism-related business as well as pushing local business to focus on goods and services for tourists.

### 1.3 What Does 'Homeless' Mean?

In 2005, the United Nations undertook the task of calculating the world's homeless population, listing an estimated 100 million people. The fact is, that there is no internationally accepted definition of what homelessness is, and, considering the weight of 'hidden homelessness', 100 million is very likely an underestimation.

'Homelessness' covers a range of situations well more numerous and diversified than in the past.

In Japan's case, the government estimates that among the 15,000 people who spent the night at *manga cafés* about 4,000 are technically homeless. Known as 'cyber homeless' the most common are people between the ages of 30s and 50s, accounting for 38.5 percent and 27.9 percent respectively. Several low-wage Japanese employees earn little money, making them ineligible for welfare while preventing them to rent a flat in Tokyo [Paul, 2015].

Homelessness in Australia is a very interesting case, in the way the official definition of homelessness puts into relation housing and the sense of belonging.

The Australian definition of the Australian Bureau of Statistics points out the complexity of the issue: *home*, not house or roof. The ABS statistical definition states that when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- "is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- *does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations*"<sup>7</sup>.

The ABS definition of homelessness is informed by a conception that emphasises the core meanings attached to 'home', including a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. To ABS, then, homelessness is a lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home'.

The definition has been built focusing on the adequacy of the dwelling; security of tenure in the dwelling; but also access to space for social relations. If the UN were to accept Australia's definition, their estimate would exceed 1.6 billion – roughly 20 percent of the population.

Such definition, while being questionable on statistical grounds, has dared to point out and underline an element often overlooked when it comes to housing, which drives us to widen our theoretical framework: after having considered the housing topic within the spatial dynamic of capitalism, we will look at it from the perspective of the *public space*.

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<sup>7</sup> See: Australian Bureau of Statistics definition of homelessness, italics added.



## 2. A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The distinguished scholar Émile Benveniste [Benveniste, 1969: 367] has long since demonstrated that there is a basic opposition in Indo-European languages, namely in Latin and Greek, it points out a fundamental difference in the ways the two cultures meant citizenship: while both kept the distinction between the built city (*asty* in Greek, *urbs* in Latin) and the inhabited city (*polis* in Greek, *civitas* in Latin), for the Greeks it was the belonging to the *polis* which made the inhabitants citizens, while for the Latins it was the community of citizens (*cum-cives*) the ground on which the entire city relied.

This cultural distinction is relevant to our topic for its emphasis on the necessity of thinking about cities taking into account the two sides of the urban coin, the two cities, so to speak, at once, as a whole. And this approach is all the more important today since mainstream urban planning is still too focused on the city of stones, the built environment, while, at the same time, the city of people is undergoing a radical change.

Everyone knows that traditional “social containers” [Taylor, 1994] – nation-states, households, educational institutions – are challenged by the proliferation, spreading, and massive influence of the so-called *social media*: even in politics, where by now communication through social media has become a prominent battlefield to gain and keep public consensus, like in an endless election campaign.

The fact is that, notwithstanding this situation was foreshadowed already in the 60s by some urban planning scholars, like Melvin Webber, the practice of public urban planning is still anchored to an old fallacy: the “therapeutic illusion of space” [Maciocco and Tagliagambe, 2009: 1].

On the one hand, today, one belongs to different and delocalised communities of interests and the quantity and intensity of individual interactions are no longer a direct function of proximity and population density, on the other hand, the constant attempt to characterise one's own experiences relative to places is not abandoned.

This is the missing link of planning in which resides the gap between the two cities.

Planning still seems disinclined or unwilling to give up the old “therapeutic illusion of space”: the idea of improving cities' life by operating on the built environment, assuming, in doing this, that there is a *natural* overlapping between physical space and social space, while it is not the case [Maciocco, 2014: 2].

Besides, the social tensions fuelled by the 2008 crisis come from a dissolving social terrain, which, as Alain Touraine has long demonstrated, is composed of individuals who increasingly do not consider themselves in social terms but rather in *cultural* terms.



In the face of the universalism of political rights, we are seeing ever more the *insular* concerns of cultural rights: below the global struggle for citizenship, which is shown as the core of the question of immigration, cultural claims are working, that are always particular.

But, the most pertinent and urgent question is:

The crisis and the end of the social issues lead in very different directions, from the return of the idea of secularisation, which eliminates any recourse to *principles located outside social exchanges*, to the most extreme – that is the most desocialised – forms of individualism, which defines a minimalist morality (...). Knowing that, in industrial society and in previous societies, the social actor was guided by a *meta-social principle* - God, human nature, progress or the future -, is it possible for us, in a post-social situation, to find *an equivalent - necessarily non-social - of these principles?* [Touraine, 2013: 79, italics added]

Indeed, the disjunction between space and society has long been investigated as a genetic feature of the social phenomenon itself [Tarde, 1895; Simmel, 1908; Sloterdijk, 2004, pp. 261-308; Farinelli, 2014]. However, the end of society comes during a phase of convergence of demographic and family structures, of literacy rates, drastically reducing the differences between the spaces of experience and the horizons of expectations of what once were considered mutually exclusive closed civilisations [Courbage, Todd, 2007]. What we thought were compact and coherent civilisations, based on different and specific cultural models, are in fact local or regional answers or solutions to global issues, in a general framework in which new forms of physical and informational mobility (no longer limited to the obsolete notion of “migration”: Hoerder, 2002) are increasingly loosening the long-standing ties between territories and cultures [Roy, 2008].

The *spatial multiplicities* that we persist in calling them societies [Sloterdijk, cit.] cannot be understood by keeping to assume them to be isomorphic not only to national spaces but also to a presumed social space that would welcome them all, ordering them, based on now-obsolete conceptual pairs – work / non-work, individual/social [Virno, 2002], innovation/backwardness [Stiegler, 2019] –, nor it is more helpful the obsessive search for neologisms, which characterises much of current research in the social sciences.

What is most relevant to our argument, is the fact that the overlapping between social space and national space, as a consequence of nation states' prevailing territorial form worldwide in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was also the ground on which legitimate expectations and hopes toward equality and democracy were built and defended.

## 2.1 Commons, Places, Trust

Roberto Esposito has developed a deep and fruitful reflection upon the sense of belonging, the sense of identity of citizens, and the notion of *property*, finding a clear contradiction in all mainstream ideas of *community*:

“The truth is that these conceptions are united by *the ignored assumption that community is a “property” belonging to subjects that join them together (...)* That this possession might refer above all to territory doesn't change things at all, since territory is defined by the category of ‘appropriation’, as the originary matrix of every other property that follows (...) *the most paradoxical aspect of the question is that the ‘common’ is defined exactly through its most obvious antonym*: what is common is that which unites the ethnic, territorial, and spiritual property of every one of its members. *They have in common what is most properly their own; they are the owners of what is common to them all*” [Esposito 2009: 2-3, italics added].

So, the territory can be considered the *reification* of this sense of community.

The neoliberal city has overstressed, overemphasised such owning-related idea of community, but this has happened through a “shift from law to ties of allegiance” [Supiot, cit.: 312] – so retrieving “feudal” forms of relationships<sup>8</sup> on the backdrop of the withering-away of the State and the overturning of the public-private hierarchy on which states themselves have been built [Supiot, cit.: 273 ff.], also impacting, of course, on housing: like in the case of “life time contracts” [Nogler and Reifner, 2014]. This meant the breach of social bonds and either the dismissal of solidarity and dignity as “unscientific”, or their adoption as long as they are subjected to calculation, so paving the way to extreme atomisation of communities, no more counting on the heteronomy of the law – a third party designed to be above all parties. This is all the more crucial when the basically unplanned (and averse to planning), informally structured nature of social “glue” is taken into account [Scott, 1999; Sennett, 2018].

## 2.2 Cities as Communities of Mind

At this point, it should be emphasised that the social “glue” of today's spatial multiplicities is increasingly shaped by algorithmic infrastructures [Stiegler, 2016; Eubanks, 2019; Longo *et alii*, 2012], which have become not only the sphere in which relationships are increasingly massively channelled (frustrating distinctions like public / private sphere), but above all, they are assuming a crucial and pervasive role in decision-making mechanisms (*algocracy*), in the transition from

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<sup>8</sup> Which represent consistent examples of what Saskia Sassen calls “capabilities that actually have—whether in medieval times, the Bretton Woods era, or the global era—jumped tracks, that is to say, gotten relodged in novel assemblages” [Sassen, 2008: 11].

*government* to *governance* that has been prevailing in Europe since the 1990s [Supiot, 2015].

Such algorithmic pervasiveness – which has found the ideal fuel in the mutual strengthening between automation as an "objective" substitute for political subjectivity and the rise of techno-sciences under the aegis of neoliberalism – has been restraining *localities* in a *private* (in the original sense of 'being deprived of') public sphere [Stiegler, Le Collectif International, 2020], divesting them of the capability to forming shared territorialities, left prey to purely defensive reactions that populisms take advantage of, so going against the very collective nature of human mind.

The human brain is the only brain in the biosphere whose potential cannot be realised on its own. It needs to become part of a network before its design features can be expressed. Since we are living beings, the networks we create are complex, fuzzy, and multilayered, rather than lean and mean, or driven solely by the needs of symbolic communication. This makes our networks radically different from those that have been invented for nonliving entities, such as computers (...). The cognitive infrastructure of human culture includes many things that we do not normally call symbolic, such as patterns of public action, the built environment, and conventional expressions of emotion. These things are the cognitive purpose, because they convey a great deal about intention, bonding, affiliation, attachment, and hierarchy. They provide structure.

The role played by culture, not only in giving shape to our relationships but also (and maybe above all) in being the ground on which our minds grow and thrive *collectively*, highlights that *individualism* – as an anthropological trait stimulated and promoted by mainstream versions of neoliberal thought – goes against a primaevial evolutionary characteristic of humans.

The result is that we are plugged-in, as no other species before us. We depend heavily on culture for our development as conscious beings. And by exploiting this connection to the full, we have outdistanced our mammalian ancestors (...) Without culture, our world-models, those highly personal and idiosyncratic visions of current reality that define all conscious experience, will inevitably shrivel. If we line up the key features of the many different kinds of minds that coexist with us on Earth and rank the breadth and complexity of their world models, we can see how deeply we depend on our cultural hook-up. [Donald, 2001: 324].

### 2.3 Ow(n)ing and Belonging

As Claude Raffestin has pointed out, there is a dialectic interplay between possession and property, between the German *Besitz* that indicate occupation, i.e., the verb *besetz*, and the concept of property, or *Eigentum*. Although the distinction between possession and property tends if not to disappear at least to fade, we must recall that they are two different things, be they material things or

not. As far as edges are concerned, there is likely a deliberate confusion between possession and property, or, if you prefer, a fusion, which is in some way the outcome of the refusal to accept norms one doesn't want to acknowledge [Raffestin, 2016: 120].

The long-standing legacy of the conceptual couple *community/property* fades along certain *edges*, which define a geography of cities as urban realms where a *radical shift in such logic* takes place.

The Western tradition of the city – as the privileged birthplace, homeland, cradle of politics, and, particularly, of democracy – it is indeed a story of exceptions, of unlikely experiments carried out at the edge of major political and economic systems, which could have vanished many times at a history's turn and being forgotten.

On the other hand, the Mediterranean urban history offers many lessons to be learnt on this matter. That the city is *divided and divisive in itself* [Loraux, 1997]. But, at the same time, that through the relation of tangible (the built environment) and intangible (human relations, in the broader sense), it constitutes a *collective mind*, a *common intelligence*, perhaps the *oldest known experiment of artificial intelligence* (in the precise sense of the cultural nature of human beings, namely *naturally artificial beings*) [Neve, 2018].

This is why today studying the Mediterranean can provide insights into what is happening in the rest of the world [Leontidou, 1993; Neve, forthcoming].

Madrid has the largest shantytown in Europe (16 kilometres long and over 7300 inhabitants). Seventeen nationalities coexist in an eclectic collection of self-built houses. Such a forgotten *barrio*, Cañada Real, parallel to the M50 motorway, reveals a striking diversity in the forms of housing, ranging from the simple bungalow to high houses of several stories.

Since its creation dates back to the seventies, Cañada Real has achieved a certain level of self-organisation: being divided into six sections, each distinguished by its housing conditions and age. However, the houses in Sector 1 (the oldest) are now authorised and integrated into the village of Coslada. They have municipal facilities such as garbage collection, running water and electricity. Thus, part of the Cañada Real has become *visible de jure*, while the other sectors (at least two of them) should be demolished by decree of the Municipality of Madrid [Pattem, 2019].

In a world overwhelmed by competing (often deceitful) narratives, research taking Anthropocene's issues seriously must also account for such elusive *edges*, instead of lingering on comfortably familiar mindsets.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The global character and the severity of the housing issue bring to the fore, perhaps more than any other matter, the burden of inequalities generated by urban neoliberal policies.

And not only because it mostly affects the poorest countries as well as the poorest areas *within* affluent regions and nations, but also because of its nature of cross-cutting issue, also impacting on people once supposed to belong to the middle class but unable to be considered eligible for welfare in the withering-away of the State intensified by neoliberal policies.

Besides, birth-rate trends have been already showing for a long time the growing gap between a shrinking minority which can afford to enjoy the benefits of globalisation and the increasing underdogs [De Blij, 2009]; trends which the current pandemic, while aggravating life conditions for the have-nots (for good measure), does not seem capable of substantially modifying their course [UNFPA, 2021].

But the gravest impact of the neoliberal city strikes what was once one of the basic tenets of modern State: civil cohabitation.

When the *heteronomy* of law is annihilated, speaking of *belonging* becomes meaningless. In the background of relationships in which everyone must serve the interests of those on whom he or she depends and be able to rely on the loyalty of those who depend on him or her on the strict basis of self-interest, there is no place for universal rights or principles, let alone a human right like housing.

Such fatal drift could be reversed not leaving powerful tools like ICT to a private use through which relationships are shaped and driven by private companies' marketing to feed consumption. But reactivating a real *public* sphere, reaffirming the value of principles like dignity and solidarity, while reinstating the trust in the law, which means, as far as the EU is specifically concerned, to find a way to dissolve the contradiction between *sovereignty* and *subsidiarity*.

Notwithstanding the oversimplified tone of such suggestions, forced by the limits of an article, we believe that they envisage a feasible perspective, so that cities return to truly being communities of mind.

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