

The Right to the City

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Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them.

Paul Valery *Tel Quel 2 (1943). French critic & poet (1871 - 1945)*



Agenda

- 1) Neo-liberalism and the animal spirit- stating the problem
- 2) Crises accelerate urbanisation
- 3) Cities in Turmoil
- 4) *Why the Right to the City?*
- 5) Strategies – informalization and alternative economy

1) Neo-liberalism and the animal spirit- stating the problem

Reached the end of the dark era of neoliberal globalization but the novo-rich, the transnational elites and clients in banking, financiers and politicians are still struggling and letting us – the people -pay for the crises they made.

UNCTAD's Trade and Development Report 2010 came out two weeks ago: "Export-led growth prescriptions are associated with the neoliberal capitalist Washington Consensus." – "The global economic and financial crisis has marked the end of the model of export-led growth for everybody."

But the multiple crises continues to devastate and destroy human and social relations and reinforces the survival of the fittest.

The central problem to be addressed is clear enough: *compound growth forever is not possible: capital accumulation can no longer be the central force impelling social evolution.* The troubles that have beset the world these last thirty years signal that a limit is looming that cannot be transcended. Add to this the fact that so many people in the world live in conditions of abject poverty, that environmental degradations are spiraling out of control, that human dignities are everywhere being offended even as the rich are piling up more and more wealth at the expense of everyone.

Mankind facing momentous challenges

Climate change

Financial and social crises

Poverty and Inequality

Water, Oil, Food and Energy crises

2008 – first time that 50% of world's people live
in cities

Cities - *problem & solution to global crisis*

2) Crises accelerate urbanisation

Why people leave rural areas:

- armed or other displacement conflicts
- food insecurity and destitution, climate change etc

...and settle in urban and peri-urban areas

- living in precarious situations

On the edge -- global warming and urban and global catastrophe

- ‘Business-as-usual’ - 50% risk of global temp. increase +5°C by 2100
- Cities consume 75% of world energy
- Contribute 80% of GHG emissions

- Cities - *central role in tackling* climate change

Urban poor are getting poorer

About 100m extra people affected in 2009

SAPs have led to downsizing of government – and hence public sector employment – city governments:

- declining revenue
- cuts in services

The millions of urban squatters pouring into megacities each year are not simply a new global migrant underclass, consigned to live in chaos and work in the shadow economy. Instead, they often form functional, self-organizing ecosystems that are "off the grid."

Problems in slums

Lack of redistributive policies/implementations

Moving populations, different ethnic groups, origins, culture -> fragmentation

Moving slums: development forces slum people displaced or moved -> new slum in peri-urban

Insecurity, Violence, Criminal activities, Drugs...

Medical risk factors: High HIV, poor nutrition...

Lack of infrastructure (basic sanitation, hygiene, education)

3) Cities in Turmoil

In 2010 Bangkok was torched in flames – street fights between the military, police and demonstrators ended in a massacre

Demonstrations and the dispossessed in Athens, Istanbul and in Kathmandu etc. occupy city centres and fight the military and police

In reality the urban battles are against inequality and uneven development, demolitions and protests against downsizing as a result of financial collapse.

They are protests against informalization and deportation and a revolt against barbarianism.

Which rights?

“Tens of millions of people in Southeast Asia today endure various levels of housing rights violations and insecurity of tenure. Most of them are poor and the vulnerable,”

Housing rights violations – including forced evictions – continue to be one of the most intractable human rights issues in the region.

Cambodia, land and housing rights violations have become one of the most prevalent forms of human rights violation following the destruction of the country’s land and property records in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge rule. Tens of thousands have been dispossessed of their lands, dwellings and properties by powerful economic and political forces identified with the country’s elite and their allies in big business. For example, more than 3,000 families living around Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh have suffered or are currently threatened with forced eviction in the context of a land development project that involves filling the lake.

Philippines, demolitions and forced evictions continue to take place in Manila and Quezon City, and around 400,000 families in Metro Manila are threatened with forced eviction. This includes 60,000 families in the Manggahan Floodway, targeted for displacement, and in the Pasig River area, where the homes of 40,000 families are set to be demolished despite promises from the new government.

In **Myanmar**, hundreds of thousands have suffered various levels of housing and other human rights violations. Mega-projects reportedly being funded by foreign investment (gas pipelines, mega-dams and large-scale mining) often lead to large-scale displacement and widespread destruction of homes, properties and livelihoods. For example, a proposed five-dam cascade on the Salween River directly threatens the livelihoods of over 70,000 people. Mounting incidents of military abuses, forced relocation, forced labour and land confiscation at the dam sites are being reported.

What we see is a process of displacement and what David Harvey calls 'accumulation by dispossession' lie at the core of urbanization under capitalism. It is the mirror-image of capital absorption through urban redevelopment, and is giving rise to numerous conflicts over the capture of valuable land from low-income populations that may have lived there for many years.

Rebellion

Signs of rebellion are everywhere: the unrests in China and India is chronic, civil wars rage in Africa, Latin America is in ferment. Any of these revolts could become contagious. Unlike the fiscal system, however, the urban and peri-urban social movements of opposition, of which there are many around the world, are not tightly coupled; indeed most have no connection to each other. If they somehow did come together, what should they demand?

Why the *Right to the City*?

Draws on *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

(Friedrich Engels, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, John Friedman)

Social action, eg: Brazil, WSF, urban popular movements and left parties

We live, after all, in a world in which the rights of private property and the profit rate trump all other notions of rights.

The right to the city should be a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.

The RTTC “*is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city*”

David Harvey

Rights based approach to urban development and social inclusion

Promoted through a range of tools & instruments:

These include

Direct action

Legal & policy reform

Popular movements and citizen forums

City charters



5) Strategies – informalization and alternative economy

Revolutionary change by NGOs is problematic. They are too constrained by the political and policy stances of their donors. So even though, in supporting local empowerment, they often help open up spaces where anti-capitalist alternatives become possible and even support experimentation with such alternatives, they most often do nothing to prevent the re-absorption of these alternatives into the dominant capitalist practice: In many cases they even encourage it..

The self-organizing powers of people in the daily situations in which they live has to be the basis for any anti-capitalist alternative. “Solidarity economies“ in informalized economies based on bartering, collectives, and local production systems is the preferred political economic form.

Some are radically anti-capitalist in their stance and espouse revolutionary objectives.

These movements are providing a widespread base for experimentation with anti-capitalist politics.

Another trend is given by the transformation that has been occurring in labor organizing and left political parties - is not hostile to the conquest of state power or hierarchical forms of organization. Indeed, it regards the latter as necessary to the integration of political organization across a variety of political scales.

The Bolivarian movement in Latin America and the ascent to state power of progressive governments is one of the most hopeful signs of a resuscitation of a new form of left statism.

The conclusion is simple enough: The three types of oppositional anti-capitalist organization can in principle collaborate and demand greater democratic control over the production and utilization of the surplus.

Since the urban process is a major channel of surplus use, establishing democratic management over its urban deployment constitutes the right to the city.

Throughout capitalist history, some of the surplus value has been taxed, and in social-democratic phases the proportion at the state's disposal rose significantly. The neoliberal project over the last thirty years has been oriented towards privatizing that control.

One step towards unifying these struggles is to adopt the right to the city as both working slogan and political ideal, precisely because it focuses on the question of who commands the necessary connection between urbanization and surplus production and use.

The democratization of that right, and the construction of a broad social movement to enforce its will is imperative if the dispossessed are to take back the control which they have for so long been denied, and if they are to institute new modes of urbanization.