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Between reality and imagination

Municipalities in pursuit of the eutopia

Abstract

What are the contemporary 'eutopias' - places where the conditions are so ideally perfect that there is complete contentment? According to Elisabetta Mocca, only a few cities can currently be described as genuinely sustainable, smart, creative and networked. But she believes that it is possible to achieve 'eutopia' through the joint efforts of municipalities, providing everyone is part of the process, from the 'virtuous' to the less fortunate, from wealthy to less affluent municipalities.

> Introduction

The city has always caught the imagination of writers and theorists: from whimsical narratives of urban futures to proposals to build a new societal and political order, the city is the place of the utopia. The urban dimension has also attracted the attention of social scientists. Urban studies scholarship has examined the current urban economic, social and political dynamics, as well as gathered evidence to outline future urban scenarios. This latter category includes both empirical studies, which, drawing on up-to-date evidence, outline possible scenarios, or speculative, based on theoretical conjectures on urban phenomena. This body of literature explores more or less possible alternatives to actual cities, often depicted as problem-ridden

and unfortunate places.

Urban futures scholarship, spanning from urban planning to sociology and political science, suggests how the future city - i.e. the most desirable urban type - should look like and how it could be realised. Contemporary visions of urban futures can best be described as eu-topias - good places. Stemming from the analysis of the environmental and social problems affecting contemporary cities, especially after the crumbling of the Fordist model, proposals for urban alternatives seek to address present urban challenges by devising solutions to create more liveable cities.

But what are the contemporary eutopias? Many visions have been developed and several catchy labels have been produced. In the

social sciences, the city of tomorrow is widely described as sustainable, smart and creative. A last type of urban eutopia inferred from social science literature can be defined as the network city, which is the object of studies on interurban relations. These labels for the city of tomorrow are strongly interrelated, rather than alternatives.

While many research contributions have described future urban visions and prescribed solutions to achieve them, contemporary cities - or at least most of them - can hardly be described as sustainable, smart, creative and networked. Environmental degradation, poverty and social exclusion still affect cities. Furthermore, many municipalities do not have access to cutting-edge technologies and are marginalised in global networks. However, the future of cities is not bleak. Rather, as this paper argues, the eutopia may be achieved through the joint efforts of municipalities.

This paper is organised as follows. After this introduction, in the ensuing sections the main streams of research on the future city are sketched out and the disjunction between the imagined and the actual city is briefly discussed. In the final section, concluding remarks are provided.

> The sustainable city

Over the recent years, much ink has been poured about the need to achieve sustainability in cities. Sustainable city and its cognate concepts - eco-city and zero-carbon city - have become the 'idealtypes' of the future city. Although no clear-cut definition of sustainable city exists, it is argued that:

"sustainability in an urban setting describes the potential of a city to reach a new level of socioeconomic, demographic, environmental and technological performance, which in the long run reinforces the foundations of the urban system itself"

(Nijkamp and Pepping, 1998, p.1483)

Research on urban sustainability implicitly believes in the possibility of realising the sustainable city, prescribing policies and technological solutions to achieve it. From an economic viewpoint, in the ideal sustainable city new job opportunities will be generated through policies supporting the creation of environmentally friendly businesses. In particular, green economy and green jobs are seen as the key for a low-carbon future, combining clean development with job creation and growth. At the same time, the sustainable city will be a socially just place, where people can have equal access to goods (environmental goods included) and services - transport, education, health and housing. The sustainable city will also be inclusive and participatory, broadening the engagement of citizens in community life and in political decision-making. Finally, the sustainable city will be characterised by high reuse of materials and low waste of resources, through the deployment of carbon reduction technologies and renewable energy sources.

Despite not being an unfeasible utopia, contemporary cities are far from being sustainable. The economic system is still anchored to the consumerist paradigm, hinging on the linear model of production-consumption-disposal. Still, much waste is landfilled and inevitably lost. While different development strategies have been theorised, based on reduced consumption and production patterns, the idea of continuous growth persists. Concrete examples of solidarity economy (time banks, local currencies, etc.) or circular economy have already been implemented, although these remain local and scattered examples. Similarly, social inequalities persist in cities. Ethnic and class segregation in the form of ghettos or slums still exist in several cities. Many individuals live in deprived neighbourhoods characterised by poor quality houses, with limited access to public services, shops and amenities. From a political perspective, while some attempts have been made (e.g. participatory budgeting and planning), many crucial political decisions are still taken without consulting the public, especially those dealing

with urban development. The oft-repeated request for greater involvement of citizens in urban development issues is exemplified by widespread campaigns against the privatisation of utilities. Finally, while gardens, parks and greenways have been built in cities around the world, the construction of nuclear power plants, incinerators, high-speed trains and motorways is on the agenda of several municipal governments. This has triggered waves of protests opposing these projects, considered not only as a threat to the health of the environment and humans, but also as symbols of a relentless pursuit of urban growth.

> The smart city

Linked to the sustainable city is the idea of a smart city. Building upon concepts such as 'intelligent', 'virtual', 'digital', 'information', 'cyber' and 'wired' city (Batty et al., 2012, p. 483; Schaffers et al., 2011, p. 434), the smart city integrates the latest developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) within the economic and social spheres. In particular, central to the smart city concept is the human and social capital, transport and ICTs, which deliver a more liveable place characterised by a sustainable economy, balanced use of environmental resources and fostering citizen participation (Caragliu et al., 2011).

The latest advancements in ICTs have enabled faster and more far-reaching material and non-material exchanges, paving the way for a more efficient and inclusive society. The "new economy" has yielded a significant increase in productivity in both the developed and the developing countries (Castells, 2005). The use of the internet in public management can contribute to the provision of "citizen-centric" services (Nam and Pardo, 2011, p.287). Moreover, a broader use of online systems is deemed to be conducive to a greater engagement of citizens in political life.

While emphasising the importance of the human factor, the concept of 'smart city' stems from a strong trust in technology and science, and from an implicit belief in

continuous technological innovation. The smart city, with a central role played by ICTs, is an e-topia - to borrow the term coined by Mitchell (1999) - whereby technologies and "smart people" will improve the liveability of future cities. Whereas many cities, especially in developing countries, are marketed as being smart, the use of technological innovations raises some concerns. Smart technologies are not distributed evenly among the various sectors of society: less affluent individuals or people living in isolated areas are less likely to access ICTs (Castells, 2002). Moreover, the emphasis on increasing the availability of data for security and control purposes may restrict the privacy of individuals (Correia and Wünstel, 2011). This raises concerns about the respect for personal freedom, which may be violated in the name of technological advancement, recalling gloomy visions of the future depicted by dystopian fictions. Finally, the emphasis on "smart people" as an asset of competitiveness may engender economic and social inequalities, inasmuch as low-skilled individuals may be marginalised in the labour market.

> The creative city

More than a vision, the creative city is a "new method of strategic urban planning," examining "how we can make our cities more liveable and vital by harnessing people's imagination and talent" (Landry, 2008, p. xi). Following Landry and Bianchini (1995), the creative city can be described as one where problems are addressed through ad hoc and imaginative solutions, rather than through bureaucracy-led planning restrained by standard rules. In a loose sense, creative city refers to an urban development model emphasising the role of "media and entertainment industries, art and cultural heritage, and creative business-to-business services" (Landry, 2008, p. xxxix).

The creative city was born out of the need to tackle the issues of deindustrialisation, which harshly affected cities with an industrial economy. As a result, former industrial cities shifted their production patterns towards the

tertiary and quaternary sectors of the economy, developing an information-based or knowledge economy. Culture - both the valorisation of cultural heritage and the production of new knowledge in universities and research centres - is another asset that helps cities move away from their industrial past.

Although the participatory and inclusive character of the creative city is emphasised, the local political elite retains the decision making power, selecting the types of initiatives that will be implemented and the actors who will deliver them. This means that a creative approach is possible if there is a local political class favourable to it, leaving the realisation of this urban vision to the fickleness of the political system. A further limit is the common opinion that considers the creative industry a non-basic sector. Hence, the creative economy performs well in periods of economic growth and employment, characterised by widespread economic well-being. By way of contrast, in periods of recession, shrinking consumer demand may have a negative effect on the creative industries, whose products are often perceived by consumers as superfluous. As a result, the creative city is highly exposed to economic downturns, engendering economic and social instability.

> The network city

Cities are increasingly becoming entangled in a variety of networks, both physical (transport and streets) and non-physical. The latter category indicates more or less permanent relations among individuals, institutions, businesses, NGOs and social movements, which are connected in networks overcoming the urban boundaries. In this respect, Castells (2002, p. 550) describes a “new geography of networks and urban nodes” at various scales enabled by technological innovations in communications and transports: new urban forms brought about by the interconnection of cities are occurring at international, intranational, interregional, intraregional and interurban levels. Thanks to such technological innovations, individuals and organisations can

connect more easily and quickly than in the past, enabling the creation and maintenance of cooperative structures. Paraphrasing Castells’ concept of a “network state” (Castells, 2005), we can define this type of city as a “network city”, characterised by the presence of a plurality of non-physical networks, which contribute to shaping urban identity and the socio-political context.

Studies abound on intermunicipal organisations, such as local/regional, national, cross-border and transnational cooperative networks. The objectives of the municipalities’ collaborative networks vary. Local/regional intermunicipal consortia and some cross-border organisations aim at pooling resources to supply services more efficiently. The purpose of national interurban networks is to exchange information and knowledge on specific issues, and to lobby higher-level institutions. These objectives are also pursued by transnational interurban networks, which seek to gain access to international funding and boost their international profile.

Following this strand of research, it seems that in the future municipal governments will be even more interconnected in a variety of networks. While we cannot talk of municipal mergers, we can foresee closer cooperation especially among cities located in different countries, as exemplified by the new territorial cooperation agreements both at EU and local level (such as Eurodistrict or the intermunicipal consortia). Likewise, individuals and organisations will be more likely to be part of local, national and international networks, both real and virtual. Within networks, city governments, organisations and citizens are interconnected, forming an easily accessible, dynamic and evolving urban system. Nonetheless, created along identitarian and/or functional lines, networks can be closed and exclusive. The existence in many networks of specific objectives and interests or entry requirements may deter certain individuals, institutions or organisations from joining them. This, paradoxically, leads to the marginalisation and isolation of non-members.

> Conclusions

While emphasising different urban development strategies, the urban visions outlined above share common limitations. The achievement of sustainable, smart, creative and networked cities through, for instance, the deployment of ICTs and renewables, the creation of an environment attracting creative industries and the participation in interurban networks - especially at supranational level - requires considerable initial investment from municipal governments. This means that mainly municipalities with large budgets can transform their territories into more liveable places. As a result, the urban quest for eutopia brings about interurban competition, generating winners - celebrated as good models to emulate - and losers, blamed as examples of bad local administration.

While seeking to achieve equality and inclusion within the city, these urban visions overlook the negative effects that interurban competition may cause. In brief, cities with higher quality of life are more likely to attract a professional elite, businesses and exogenous investment than less virtuous localities. Hence, wealthy cities gain a competitive advantage over the less affluent municipalities, marginalised in the lower end of the urban hierarchy. Notwithstanding, some achievements of liveable cities may be neutralised by the poor environmental, economic and social outcomes of their less “virtuous” counterparts. For example, by emitting high levels of carbon dioxide, less sustainable cities may undermine the environmental performance of green cities. Therefore, eutopia should not be planned as an isolated local dream without taking into account the consequences for the broad urban system. Rather, eutopia can be achieved only if it is planned jointly by both the “virtuous” and the less fortunate, the wealthy and the less affluent municipalities. Social, economic and environmental disparities among cities can be levelled off through interurban cooperation capable of developing tailored solutions.

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