

Urban crisis: Bonfire of vanities to find opportunities in the ashes

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Abstract

This article argues that a critical urban studies needs to examine the reproduction of crisis in cities not just at a macro level, but also in the day-to-day activities in urban administrations. Time and power are implicated in frenetic activities in which officials find themselves beleaguered by the pace of change and the opportunities for learning then evaporate. An urban imaginary, based on permanent possibilities for the future, enables a culture of expertise to emerge that is at odds with democracy through a separation between the forms of justification it deploys and the contexts of its application. That process enables a spectator view of the urban that is fed by an antiseptic scientism in which models and ideas for urban development circulate without sensitivity to context. The article calls for a movement away from these narrowly constituted forms of knowledge production and reception to provide a responsible politics through a more open and inclusive approach to urban development.

Keywords

development, expertise, future, knowledge, learning

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Introduction

Crisis means upheaval. Situations become uncertain and are accompanied by fear and anxiety. Reactivity in the face of flux becomes the norm with pro-activity in the name of progress through inclusion and the moulding of the future according to a will of the present, taking a back seat. With one, crisis is addressed by the belief that the future is moulded in the present. Clear directions can be provided and recorded in strategic intent which is then accountable to those subject to its will. In the other, hopelessness tends to triumph over what is constituted as the necessity of direction by a powerful minority.

In a study published in 1950, progressive alternatives were characterised as lost in the wake of a desire to conform. Planners met an instrumentality with its narrow economic concerns set against the need for leisure and the maintenance and expansion of the aesthetic dimensions of urban life. One was triumphant over the other with the power of veto placing: ‘even the most imaginative of city planners under great pressure to show that they are practical, hard-headed fellows, barely to be distinguished from traffic

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engineers' (Riesman with Glazer and Denney, 1989 [1950]: 306). Then, in the early 1960s, when Jane Jacobs (1993) published her study, she characterised the government of large metropolitan areas as 'crazy quilts'. In so doing she pointed out the redundancy of past strategies for dealing with new urban problems.

In the pages of this special issue we have been provided with a genealogy of the idea of crisis in which the idea emerged in the 1950s, but where it is concluded that elites are the winners through a process of absorbing its critical, transformative potential and getting things 'back to normal' (Weaver, 2016, this issue). Processes of reproducing austerity urbanism are examined to take seriously the links between macro and micro processes in terms of subjectivity and regimes of practice (Fuller and West, 2016, this issue), local cultures and conditions (Barbehön and Münch, 2015, this issue) and the containment strategies of public authorities in alleviating the alienating effects of capital accumulation (Bayırbağ and Penpecioglu, 2015, this issue). Without a better understanding of these issues, critique misses the target and so the potential for positive change. The absence of such understanding leads city officials to be bemused at the speed of changes, dissatisfied with the lack of time to reflect and frequently silenced unless engaged in anticipatory practices around narrowly conceived models of urban growth. That displaces possibilities and has social-psychological advantages: 'Habitus of necessity operate as a defence mechanism against necessity, which tends, paradoxically, to escape the rigours of necessity by anticipating it and so contributing to its efficacy' (Bourdieu, 2000: 232–233). Time and knowledge then become implicated in power relations that work to relieve participants of engagement with alternatives (May and Perry, 2017a).

Insightful contributions on how crises impacts upon cities through various scales of

governance are provided in this special issue. In Madrid (Martí-Costa and Tomàs, 2016, this issue), Barcelona (Blanco and León, 2016, this issue), Detroit, Dallas, San Jose, Philadelphia (Hinkley, 2015, this issue), Athens (Arampatzi, 2016, this issue) and Nottingham (Watkins, 2016, this issue), we see not only the effects of austerity imposed as a result of the provision of state welfare for the irresponsible actions of the banking sector, but also a desire for alternatives. Common to these accounts is a continuing characterisation of the 'crazy quilts' of urban areas, but a belief among politicians and officials that these environments can be shaped through a 'will' embodied in formal policy, whilst more informal community-based forms of innovation and solidarity remain below the radar of recognition. At a time when we see the mobilisation of divisive political rhetoric masked under the banner of populism, what can we learn from these experiences?

Strategies in the name of permanent possibility

Whilst the spatial form of the city is never historically complete and also contains 'unavoidable continuities' (Beauregard and Haila, 2000), a difference from these earlier accounts to those in this special edition is that they are characterised by an increase in the intensity of oscillations between continuity and discontinuity. The articles frame the city as a site of dynamic encounters between cooperation and competition, with the former providing the basis of solidarity among social groups. In the case of competition, we find an emphasis that is apparent in the idea of some 'natural economy' that requires continual efforts at attracting global capital as a basis of survival. As a result the arena of competition has become wider and as it expands at a faster rate, a political lag arises in which social problems become

increasingly evident. The formal apparatus of politics can then easily become separated from the forces of the political that reside in the myriad of reactions within civil society.

We do not need to look far to see how the fantasy of omnipotence over urban environments has crumbled before our eyes and the instrumentality of which Riesman and his collaborators spoke of has not yielded its results. Neoliberal conditions exacerbate the causes that produce crises through, for example, what has been suggested in these pages as a selectivity that focuses upon containment. Cities are sites of crisis, contestation and transformative possibility with forms of community solidarity emerging to ameliorate the resulting symptoms of inequality. For those who have examined these tendencies, this is a characteristic of the dialectic between helplessness and omnipotence when societies are: 'dominated by the wage form of labor and commodity form of need satisfaction' (O'Connor, 1987: 167).

The very idea of upheaval is regarded as core to the forward march of fundamentalist free-market ideologues and contributors have argued that the term crisis is mobilised as a discursive strategy to influence populations. Here we find conceptions of freedom that are only possible under conditions of 'cataclysmic change – when people, with their stubborn habits and insistent demands, are blasted out of the way – moments when democracy seems a practical impossibility' (Klein, 2007: 20–21). A resulting precariousness causes us to reach out if not for resolution, at least for some greater degree of control. Here ideas of freedom play their role in terms of control. However, to what end? The tendency is to link that to the creation of conditions for the economic outlets of enterprise and innovation, as if these were separate from the social conditions of our being. The calculation of everyday life, through an antiseptic scientism, is sold as a panacea to social problems and there are

many technicians only too happy to feed its appetite (May and Perry, 2016a).

Freedom is nothing if we are not able to make use of it and here it is linked not only with individual capacity and capability, but more generally with authority expressed by the question 'who shall govern us'? As an activity, politics seeks closure over given terrains and issues. However, when a narrowly constituted form of 'negative liberty', to use Berlin's (1979) terms, is permitted to ride over and through the positive liberties of a collective urban citizenry, it fails to curtail its destructive elements and the city becomes a site of speculative accumulation furthering endemic crises (Harvey, 2012). In this climate the freedom created by regulation is taken as a target that imposes unreasonable limitations on negative liberties. The contributors chart this process in terms of austerity struggles and the need to re-examine urban governance given a crisis of authority.

Cities are sites of tension and opposition resulting in a politics produced in places such as Mumbai where we find a 'grudging tolerance' within the 'fragmentation of territories' (Banerjee-Guha, 2010). Globalisation is not new. Neoliberal financialisation is new and that has called for different strategies (Froud et al., 2006). When capital circulates and meets barriers and limits, enormous efforts are made to overcome and circumvent those (Harvey, 2010). Rather than a critical, open reflexive examination of pre-suppositions, limits and effects, cities market themselves for investment in the name of economic 'necessity'. New forms of possibility then emerge to provide justification for this economic short-circuiting of democratic, deliberative spaces. These include the 'information economy' (Drennan, 2002) with its need to attract a 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) within the growth of 'cognitive capitalism' (Boutang, 2011).

The creative class is part of the rise of the information economy which has been seen

in the USA as its most dynamic characteristic. Metropolitan specialisation in the information sector has positive effects on growth: 'metropolitan economies that are specialised in some parts of the information sector are more likely to have higher per capita income and stronger growth than metropolitan economies with traditional specialisations in manufacturing or distribution' (Drennan, 2002: 8). Boston, for example, is heralded as a city that successfully reinvented itself as a high wage, low unemployment and highly educated metropolitan economy. An emphasis upon the development of human capital leads to recommendations such as an increase in spending on education: 'the best single policy [...] to enhance economic growth for the information sector is improvement in the quality of and access to higher education' (Drennan, 2002: 134).

An orientation emerges that involves a suspension of present conditions in the forging of urban futures. A focus upon the creation of different types of urban forms, such as 'science cities' (May and Perry, 2011a) can relieve participants of the problems of the present and as suggested in these pages, depoliticise the local. The 'ideopolis', for example, provides a recipe to make the post-industrial city and comprises: a set of key physical and economic features; a particular social and demographic mix; and a specific cultural climate and set of commonly held values. It is an acquisition-driven view concerned with the ingredients for competitive success: high-tech manufacturing; knowledge services; a university, or universities with strong networks to commercial partners; an airport and/or major communication nodes; architectural heritage and/or iconic physical development; a flourishing service sector; large numbers of highly skill professional and front line service positions; a vibrant city culture and diverse population; an ethos of tolerance and significant local

political direction and autonomy (Canon et al., 2003: 16).

Armed with the permanent possibility of imaginary futures, politicians and officials can readily turn to the instrumental-technical mode of operation in which ever greater amounts of information are gathered about 'performance' in a side-lining of justification by the few over the assumed benefits of application for the many (May and Perry, 2017b). Recognition and analysis of crisis may be averted through processes of meticulous data gathering by armies of technicians who provide the grounds for growth as everyone is 'moving forward'. These ready-made pieces of scientism relieve their recipients of critical analysis through the provision of information that slips from political decision-making to constructed necessities in order to monitor the economy and attract the talent and companies for future vitality and viability. The tendency for public, democratic deliberations to take place diminishes and public sector organisational efforts aim to create private sector benefits as if they were a 'magic pill' for economic illness.

A frenetic set of activities may be constructed around the servicing of this process in the guise of a quiet and sustained production of information gathering. Accompanying this is a particular view of the formulation of policy. Essentially, whilst contributors have rightly pointed out differences in the governance arrangements that cities have with their states, they are increasingly seeking to act on a global stage and that sets a hierarchy among them. What city would not wish to aspire to be global? Within them, centralised command and control models in which communication over the conception of policy is taken as a prerogative, is common. A model of action is then posited that separates the information from which the policy draws from the social and economic conditions under and through it

will be enacted in given localities (May and Perry, 2011b).

City trajectories clash and collide. Whilst political choices have been made disguised as economic necessities, the whole idea of strategic success brings with it a selectivity that produces crisis. As Doreen Massey writes of London's global finance industries: 'the fact that London's "success" is one of the dynamics producing poverty and exclusion implied at least a query as to the meaning of this word "successful"' (2005: 157). All this not only increases land values, but sidelines the potential for context-sensitive learning in favour of the perpetuation of an ideology that does not see place, but constitutes an absolute space of attraction with a whole set of consequences for the communities of a city. Alongside this, as charted in these pages, are the practices of urban austerity programmes that focus upon particular subjectivities.

Criticism of the validity of these means falls upon deaf ears for they question the very pre-suppositions upon which decision-making processes are based and demonstrate an unwillingness to embrace the 'future'. The opportunities to learn from a diversity of practices evaporate and when such activity comes across impediments, as it frequently does, there is never a questioning of the whole strategic effort and its consequences, but a change in the tactics. Enterprise then mixes with varying forms of social control in cities (Body-Gendrot, 2000) and the focus analysed within these pages upon particular populations as surplus to requirements. In the efforts directed at economic attraction we see a very different form of social control from the Orwellian image which is manifest in meetings where: 'Serious looking PhDs are sitting around a table. Each is studying the same computerized records ... The atmosphere is calm' (Cohen, 1985: 185).

The modes for seeking to determine 'how' things will happen in cities by 'what' they

offer to business (May, 2011) incorporate forms of monitoring that seek to traverse city spaces, but create intra- and inter-city tensions and contradictions that are played out at different levels. This is opposed to the neatness of the fictionalised views that come through performance and output indicators and project management packages. As there is a separation of the city into discrete elements that are assumed not to interact, so there is an absence of relational considerations whose consequences require a new understanding between agglomeration processes and their operational landscapes (Brenner, 2014). The apparent sophistication of data sets constitutes ways of seeing the world that takes no account of these relational considerations. Thus, whilst there may be evidence of relative decoupling in the consumption of fossil fuels (more efficient production of goods and so less environmental damage in terms of resource use per economic unit), there is no evidence of absolute decoupling in terms of reducing overall impacts (Jackson, 2009; Koch, 2012). As cities seek competitive advantage on this basis, what then happens to the areas that surround them and how they see their populations? We can see the consequences in the accounts within these pages where a relational responsibility constituted through a concern with justice tends to be secondary to such matters as travel to work measures of a city to prove its economic influence and worth.

Policies based upon such information take no account of the complex geography of urban areas and their surrounds, but enable a bounded entity reflected in defined political territory. The focus is upon the management of the population as human capital and that contains both the included and excluded. In terms of the latter, politics then oscillates between the necessity of certain degree of 'waste' in the economy and it being unnecessary and requiring strategies

of inclusion. Despite the apparent differences in these approaches, both are: 'based on the notion of global competitiveness and are, therefore, an integral part of the internalization of the logic of globalization into the social, economic and political fabric of the state' (Cameron and Palan, 2004: 134). It is no wonder, therefore, that community reactions include the recovery of agency in the local to move beyond the 'third way', whilst official accounts refer to the 'trickle-down' effects of policies, which are nothing more than the crumbs to be spread among the grateful multitude.

Alternative practices and forms of organisation are sidelined in favour of a particular set of descriptions and a focus upon current local deficits and the attraction and retention of particular groups who offer opportunities. Local understandings become the means through which policies are expected to work and of course, they contain their own set of justifications to hold people to account for their actions. The overall effect is a 'depoliticized simulation of truth' (Poster, 1990: 62) that fails to recognise that: 'The chances of translating knowledge for action into knowledge in action are immeasurably improved once it is recognized that the probability to realize knowledge is dependent on context-specific social, political and economic conditions' (Stehr, 1992: 121). As a precondition to possibility, this would mean giving up prerogatives constituted in narrowly based futures and ideas of expertise. Who is prepared to consign these ways to the bonfire of vanities?

Whilst administrations focus their efforts upon creating terrains of possibility, cities become passive in what is a process of disaggregation through disengagement with the causes of this frenetic search; ably assisted by seeing through the lenses of particular indicators. Political technocracy is triumphant through detachment from consideration of consequence. In the meantime,

capital is not held to account, but allowed free reign. The efforts that go into maintaining a belief in control through strategic direction feeds the search for cities to market themselves as attractive to multi- and transnational corporations for profit and growth (Crouch, 2011). That, in turn, relies upon a peculiar ontological separation: between the constitution of reality and the practices that seek to mould it in their name.

That separation permits a spectator view of the urban enabled through particular sets of information that are selective and bounded but frame and justify views. When justification is called for in this frenetic pursuit, it can also be found among those academics only too happy to provide it through the provision of the latest models for success. However, to paraphrase Marx, beware those who confuse the model of reality with the reality of the model! Even among those who claim to be critical, they are subject to these processes and thus require a reflexive understanding of when boundaries not only enable, but also produce a distance through representation that replicates objectivism (May, 2005, 2006; May and Perry, 2013). This is particularly important to take account of given that the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) has the ability to absorb and utilise critique, as well as escape through displacement to other locations (Chiapello, 2013).

Whilst the history of ideas is one of increasing scepticism towards representation as a simple separation between self and the world, cities and their officials are engaged in the fetishism of a future reality as a 'belief in belief' (Žižek, 2009). The present may be easily suspended as if it were an impediment to realisation and denial takes its place. When this is constituted through the exclusion of the 'other' who is not part of the future, the struggle for recognition spills over into demands to be heard and this is important as silence is 'neoliberalism's way

with democracy' (Couldry, 2010: 150). That adds to a studied indifference or a 'moral blindness' (Bauman and Donskis, 2013) towards the plight of the excluded by those whose positions have been afforded through processes where huge efforts go into forms of justification that should be the subject of critique (Forst, 2014).

Whilst the selectivity appears to contain its own justifications, groups overtly protest as a reminder of a disjuncture, whilst others suffer in silence. Fear of present realities and particular constructions of a nostalgic past, allow politicians to raise their rallying cries for an idealised future of separation and control. Trying to rid ourselves of fear renders us subject to political manipulation. It is also heightened when complexity and heteronomy become more conspicuous. When we reach for resolution in sovereign power it, in turn, needs fear to feed it (Frost, 2010). Here we return to the crisis in our cities in terms of the absence of public spaces of deliberation, democracy and representation and facing the issues that have been identified for so long. One thing is for sure, they will not come in constituting futures that marginalise populations and serve the few by creating conditions for a never ending process of 'market flexibility'.

Summary

In this commentary on matters raised in the special issue I have concentrated on the process through which problems of the present can be suspended in the name of imaginary futures. That serves the adaptability of capitalism to permanent possibility in crises, but also heightens inequality and conflict. Whilst strategies come with their ready-made justifications and there are no shortages of those providing simple solutions to complex issues, these displace the present in a peculiar temporal, ontological separation. It is

engagement with existing issues that is needed in order to develop imaginative, participative and productive urban futures and the contributions to this volume are an important part of that process.

The world has a tendency to remind us that it is richer than we can know and this is apparent from the research contained in this volume. We discover this in our practices when we reach limits and are confounded by circumstances beyond our control. To shut down such considerations is to perform closure through 'epistemic impermeability' (May with Perry, 2011). It represents a conflation that produces a distance from the world that easily spills over into a denial of the reality of the world via, for example, indifference, arrogance or displays of 'irresponsible utopianism and irrealist radicalism' (Bourdieu, 2007: 9).

New ways are needed to deal with societal challenges that ensure decisions taken today are robust enough for sustainable, just futures (May and Perry, 2016b). Inclusion and participation should be recognised as core to the direction of cities. It is important to build not on the specialised knowledge of a few experts, but also the experience and knowledge of communities in the city. That requires an acknowledgement that difference is not an impediment to knowledge for effective action to develop, but its precondition. A movement away from an irresponsible politics of possibility for the few to a more dialogic approach is informed by causes that take account of complex environments. The contributions to this volume inform that effort in their analyses and by uncovering alternative practices. Spaces for all urban citizens to be recognised and have a stake in cities in ways that are context-sensitive and relationally responsible are possible. In this way we might move from away from the oscillations forged by crises to more just settlements.

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