



RESEARCH CONFERENCES

ESF-LiU Conference

The Right to the City: New Challenges, New Issues

Vadstena Klosterhotell, Vadstena • Sweden

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1- General context

As it has been largely documented, modern states are facing political rescaling processes in which the roles and functions of the different levels of government are evolving (Jessop 1994, 2000; Swyngedouw 2000; Brenner and Theodore 2003; Brenner 2004). Thus city-regions are becoming central economic and political territories in which a new division of labour is occurring between the states and the local level. This tendency has been particularly analysed by the economic literature, specifically the Los Angeles “school” of regional economy (Storper 1997a, 1997b; Scott 2001) but also by sociology and political science (Harvey 1989, 2000; Le Galès 2002). At the same time, there is also a large literature on the general tendency towards the pluralization of urban decision systems in different institutional, cultural, political and economic contexts (Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler and Mayer 2000).

To say it briefly, these processes (i.e. political rescaling and participative democracy at local level) generate a new “right to the city”: the capacity to influence the agendas of urban public institutions by using “appropriate” demands based on the formulation of rights recognized as legitimate by urban institutions. During this conference, this process of legitimisation, and its contrary, will be central.

Traditionally this “right to the city”, first analysed by the French sociologist H. Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968) as a “right to change the city regarding the citizens’ wishes and needs”, aims at redefining the content of urban politics and policies by challenging the general asymmetry of resources and forms of capital (political, economic, cultural) among social groups. More recently, this “right to the city” has been also used by more conservative movements in order to reproduce, in spatial terms notably, this asymmetry of resources and capital. Indeed, the role of social movements broadly on the political left is well known and analyzed, notably through their attempt to resist the urban social polarization produced by globalization by making demands for social justice and democratic participation. Yet neoconservatism and neoliberalism in recent decades have also mobilized critiques of the state, and formulated their own conception of appropriate rights-bearing citizens (individuals exercising ‘choice’ through consumption, for example). These critiques are positioned within an ideal state-society relationship, where regulation is “rolled back” and the market assumes more responsibilities. Thus, the on-going process of the constitution of an “urban citizenship” (Isin 2000, 2003) involves a set of social demands which are, by definition, contradictory in that sense that the “right to the city” must be linked to the social groups and classes using it in order to organize themselves, to generate collective identity and collective action. The work program of the Conference addresses a number of empirical subjects, all vectors of a “right to the city”. Its objective is to compare the effects of these dynamics on the content of urban policies and on the transformation of citizenship regimes.

The conference seeks to question and compare the use of the “right to the city” in different metropolitan contexts. It will pay a particular attention on the “local trap” “in which the local scale is assumed to be inherently more democratic, just, or sustainable than larger scales. [...] The local trap is extremely prevalent, especially in leftist academia and activism. It appears to be almost habit for radicals (political economists, feminists, anti-racists, etc.) to prefer *a priori* the local scale” (Purcell 2005). Globalization, political rescaling and the “right to the city” are interlinked but they do not have the same significations and the same rationale among cities and social groups. This conference aims at analysing these differences and at putting the emphasis on the local adaptations and translations of the “right to city” by referring it systematically to the social groups who use it in order to structure the urban policy agendas. It will not conceive the “right to the city” as a legal framework or tool (though it may have some legal basis, i.e. creation of *ad hoc* participative institutions for immigrants and minorities groups, participative budget, ...). The focus will be put on a more sociological and political approach which will refer to use of the “right to the city” as a discursive strategy for political mobilization. In this sense, the “right to the city” is socially constructed. It allows us to examine the traditional question : who governs the city and how?

2- Details

The claims and expectations of civil societies regarding direct participation in the construction of collective choices are one component of the broader debate on the current transformation of the exercise of citizenship in contemporary political systems of government. Whilst formal citizenship is and will long be centred on the state, the work of T. H. Marshall established that it is not a static political category (Marshall 1964). Quite the opposite: as a universal principle applying to all the individuals that compose a political community, regardless of differences in class, gender, ethnic group or language, citizenship has undergone major, intrinsic changes over time.

Until now, citizenship was extended essentially by the state, which played a major part in the regulation of contemporary societies in countries of the ‘North’ and ‘South’ alike. It is this ‘state-centred’ model that has been challenged over the last twenty years, due to a combination of various socio-political dynamics that differ in intensity from one institution and from one political culture to another (Jouve and Booth 2005).

It is the state’s ‘benevolent neutrality’ that is currently being called into question, as well as its functional incapacity to regulate society on its own. This is the broad context in which this call for papers takes on its full meaning. We assume an ongoing transformation in the relationship between public authorities and civil societies. In this context, cities are places of struggles, of experimentation, of learning and of resistance with respect to the initiation of new citizenship regimes.

It now seems to be generally accepted that citizenship regimes are not centred on state institutions alone. It can be argued, in accordance with T. H. Marshall, that the gradual extension of citizenship regimes is followed by an extension of the territories where they are exercised. The key notion underlying this call for papers is that the emergence of metropolitan civil societies making claims for access to the political agenda and using the “right to the city” as a discursive strategy for political mobilization allows us to analyze the struggles among social groups and classes. The main issue at stake is the official recognition (by urban institutions) of their “rights” and the definition of the geographical scale at which they have to be implemented (McCann 2003). This call for papers would like to complete this approach by establishing a close relationship between this political rescaling and the “right to the city” discourse generating by competing social groups.

The four-day conference will address four issues and thematic areas that are currently at the core of the transformations mentioned above: the legal instruments of urban democracy, access to “primary goods and services”, cultural diversity and its consideration by public urban authorities, and, finally, empowerment. Each issue will be addressed during special one-day sessions.

2.1 The “Right to the City” and its legal instruments

Globalization carries with it considerable restructuring of the contemporary political order (Held and McGrew 2003). Whilst it is certainly risky to evoke the ultimate end of the nation-state, it is nonetheless clear that the latter has had to cope with major transformations. In both developed and developing countries, also important is a greater opening up of local decision-making systems and for the democratization of urban policies.

Although these aspirations, in the eyes of some authors, bore the “hallmark” of certain particular social groups (characterized, that is, by their relatively high social, cultural and economic capital) (Clark and Hoffmann-Martinot 1998), these dynamics are also extremely present in relatively less powerful social groups.

The Conference will focus particularly on these “legal instruments” of urban citizenship¹, from a comparative point of view. Special interest will be paid to the analysis of the socio-political conditions surrounding their creation, and to their effective impact on the urban decision-making realm.

2.2 Access to “primary goods and services”

Urban citizenship cannot be exercised unless all the members of the same political community have access to “primary goods and services” (water, transport, sanitation, housing, etc.). Equality of access to these “primary goods and services” is one translation of social rights, which are the cornerstone of the contract binding civil societies to the authorities. As social rights are considered fundamental to everyday life and essential to the dynamics of individual or collective development, the authorities are legally obliged to make these “primary goods and services” accessible to the population and social groups as a whole. If we assume the “right to the city” is socially constructed, one question for this one-day session could be: in polarized urban societies with high levels of social segregation, how is the “right to the city” used by different social groups to combat spatial injustice? We have a huge literature on the impact of urban social movements claiming for more redistributive policies (notably through the access to “primary goods and services”). However, at the same time we know that the “revolts of the elites” (Lasch 1995) tend to put into question these policies at the metropolitan level and, therefore, their inclusion in a metropolitan political community. The “gated communities” and secessionist movements in the United States, for example, are well documented. They illustrate a tendency, for certain social groups, to exclude themselves, spatially and/or institutionally, from political mechanisms of regulation at the metropolitan level. In both cases, the “right to the city” is a rhetoric and a discursive strategy which refers to different scales of political regulation. This one-day session will focus on these logics of action and their (non-)regulation by urban public institutions.

2.3 Taking cultural diversity into account

In the context of globalization and of changes in the way public policies are elaborated at the national level, cities have reinforced their role in the management of societal diversity. For although the issues of cultural diversity and its uneasy regulation have gradually superseded those of class struggle and the Keynesian compromise, the beginning of the 21st century has brought with it a new urban-region/state division of labour in the political, institutional and procedural treatment of “political minorities”. By “political minorities”, we mean groups of individuals with common and specific cultural and socio-political characteristics that form the basis of identity claims (i.e. language, religious beliefs, ethnicity, gender relations, sexual orientation), and who face similar difficulties in gaining access to the political system in liberal democracies. This access depends not only on the inclusion of their claims or expectations on the political agenda, but also on obtaining elected posts in executive bodies. Cities are a vector for the redefinition of relations between cultural communities, and between dominant social groups and political minorities. Conversely, they can also

¹ such as the Montreal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities, the neighbourhood councils in very different cities, the European Charter for the Protection of Human Rights in the City, the City Statute of Brazil or the World Charter on the Right to the City

be depending on circumstances, on local political cultures, on the ideology of urban political leaders, on institutional contexts—the territories where these “minorities” are stigmatised and rejected (Sharp 1999; Sharp 2003; Jouve and Gagnon 2006). In this part of the program of the Conference, we intend to analyze these two configurations, the policies and practices of (non-) discrimination against “minorities”, as well as the demands and the autonomous initiatives coming from such minorities.

2.4 Empowerment: the basis of a new social contract

Empowerment, like many all-purpose terms made plastic by indiscriminate use, has been highly popular for a number of years (Sirianni and Friedland 2001). Although social inequalities are becoming increasingly marked, empowerment used to refer to a set of major transformations in both policies to fight poverty and the analytical frame of reference by which individuals and social groups view their relationship with the state. Empowerment is a means of challenging the broadly asymmetrical nature of these power relations.

Empowerment has been strongly supported by large international organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in the framework of their “new” development policies, which are aimed directly at the most destitute populations, specifically in the field of urban policies. The conference will deal with the political, economic and sociological conditions from which empowerment strategies, as a way of claiming a “right to the city”, are elaborated. It will assess their impact on the redefining of relationships and responsibilities between public authorities and civil society.

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