"POVERTY AND INEQUALITIES IN THE CITIES: URBAN STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION"

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I. WHAT DO FIGURES HIDE?

1. The Final Declarations of International Conferences about cities, together with documents and reports from multilateral agencies, have consecrated an urban rhetoric that has large figures as hallmarks. Sentences and paragraphs – and sometimes even lofty chapters – have stated, at least over the past 30 years, that mankind is – or has become – urban. References are made to the share of the urban population in the overall population which, as has been declared for the first time in the millenarian history of the human species, might have exceeded the fateful threshold of 50% (even though the criteria used to calculate these figures are oftentimes far from clear). It is also common to talk about breakneck growth rates, taking as a basis for comparison Liverpool or London in the first half of the 19th century or Chicago in the roaring 1920s.

2. The truth, however, is that the monotonous and ritual repetition of such figures does not lead only to the dissemination of statistical knowledge; it also whips up fear. A specter haunts the world: the specter of "urbanity."

Despite what many people think, and notwithstanding the declarations of statisticians, figures cannot speak for themselves. They have little to say about the reality and day-to-day affairs of millions – actually, billions – of young and old city dwellers. One could even suggest that they hide – rather than reveal – the historical and structural processes that engender not only the urbanization of populations and of social life in general, but also – and above all – produce and reproduce a particular mode of urbanization that is characterized by INEQUALITY.

3. What the ritual repetition of figures intends to inculcate is the idea that urban problems such as poverty and urban inequalities stem from the magnitude of figures. Gee, if only cities would not grow so fast! Gosh, if only the population did not have such high birth rates, and if only poor women were less prolific! If only the rich would reproduce quickly instead of the poor!

4. In the period following the Second World War, developmental promises – which drew inspiration from the "theory" of stages of development – disseminated all over the world its wonderful discovery: backward countries are rural, while advanced countries are urban; thus, urbanization and development go hand in hand. High growth rates among the urban population signal the transition from backwardness to development. Hence, the good message conveyed by the prophets of this developmental line of though was: become urban and the paradise of development will be within your reach!

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The urbanization of poverty and the poverty of urbanization in peripheral countries have questioned these dominant theories. Likewise, contemporary reality calls into question those that used to link urban poverty to a simple movement or displacement of the poor from the countryside to the city.

5. What has become increasingly evident is that cities – at least most of them – are not mere storage areas for the rural poor. If the city is not – as used to be the line of thinking of 18th century physiocrat economists – a mere consumer of the wealth produced by agriculture, nor is it a simple repository for demographic surpluses stemming from the fields. Urban poverty is not a residue of "excess rural population." The city is, in and of itself, the producer and reproducer of poverty and inequality.

6. Notwithstanding the importance of establishing poverty lines and estimating how many people live below or above that momentous and arbitrary threshold, an equally important – perhaps even more important – measure would be to unveil the processes that generate poverty and poor people in the cities. The statistics of official rhetoric reveal the size of the problem to be tackled; in that sense, they can be very useful. More often than not, however, these numbers have been used to conceal the quality of the processes that produce the two faces of urban reality, namely: wealth and poverty; in other words, inequality. Figures reveal part of that reality, but they are silent about another part of that same reality.

How are we to fight poverty and inequality if their causes are not identified and overcome, if those who benefit from the status quo are not identified and toppled? Hence, without a clear understanding of such processes, any attempt at delving into the problem with a view to solving it will be doomed to failure.

II. THE SCALES OF PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF URBAN INEQUALITIES

7. First of all, one must be clear about the limits of the material and immaterial conquests that may be achieved in any given city, and even in a group of cities within any given region. In fact, first and foremost, urban poverty and inequality are deeply rooted in the social, economic, and political structure. That means that urban problems will only be understood – theoretically – and successfully overcome – in practical terms – insofar as that structure is challenged; that is, the sum total of power relations that such a structure engenders and reproduces at national and global levels.

In other words, the perverse and dramatic reality of our cities, the precarious conditions of life for billions of people that make up today's "wretched of the Earth," to borrow the phrase coined by renowned Caribbean writer and anti-colonial combatant Franz Fanon, are determined by national processes that interact with global processes. As a result, profound changes in the urban reality, given the current state of our society, require far-reaching changes in national socioeconomic and political structures as well as in the relationships between core and periphery that provide order and hierarchy to the globalized world.

8. Such an understanding would make us reject, *ad limine*, the "neo-localist" argument to think of the "local" – almost always the city – as the site for an *alternative local development* and, *a fortiori*, the construction of societal alternatives. If urban poverty and its inequalities are produced and reproduced by a social structure that transcends them, possible transformations to the urban scale are – from a logical and historical viewpoint – limited.

This realization, however, should not dishearten those – and they are many – that have dedicated their lives to transforming our cities, be it through political parties, social movements or organizations within civil society, as well as in city councils or in neighborhoods and shantytowns. One must, though, reflect rigorously upon the nature of the fight, so as to be able to develop cogent and effective actions.

9. The city is not a mere reflection of society; that is, it goes far beyond projecting territorially national as well as international social and economic structures. The city is, in its own right, a social, economic, and political universe. It produces wealth and reproduces relationships. In other words: the city is not a mere reproduction – localized and reduced – of the social structure; rather, it is also a complex of social relations – economic and social relations, but also power relations.

Contrary to the theses of strict structuralists or radical globalists, who believe that everything revolves around the sphere of structures, or that all relevant processes take place in the global sphere, we would like to suggest a new approach. The relationship between the city and the social structure is not a passive relationship, in which the city is merely a reflection of the structures, where the "local" is only an epiphenomenon of the "global"; on the contrary, the city contributes to the configuration of the social structure and helps constitute what we would call "globality."

10. The Brazilian social structure does not make it explicit that only the streets running through middle and upper-class neighborhoods should be paved, or that running water should be provided only to certain areas of the city. But the fact that this state of affairs indeed happens in our cities, rather than in French or Canadian cities, to name only two examples, introduces some significant differences in the configuration of these societies.

Although large international corporations blackmail local governments in order to obtain fiscal benefits and other favors, global relations do not make it explicit that the funds raised by local governments should be systematically allocated in order to embellish rich neighborhoods, feed the private accumulation of speculative segments of the real estate market and, as a result, reproduce urban inequality.

In other words, that means that the city, in addition to inheriting the inequalities of the social structure, may indeed increase them. And, in this case, could it not also work to reduce them? Should the answer be positive, that would mean that the city – rather than just the nation and the world – are pertinent levels for political action as well as the fight for social and environmental justice.

11. In and of itself, the city is also a powerful mechanism to generate and appropriate wealth, which is not clearly expressed nor totally determined in the social structure. That a handful of real estate developers should reap immense profits – real estate surpluses – thanks to public investments that could be channeled to the task of reducing strictly urban inequalities – that is something that is not imposed upon us by any market rules; on the contrary, that is plain and simple private appropriation of public resources. The law pointing to the "survival of the fittest" that has become institutionalized – even as it is sold as a "rule of the market" – manifests, in broad daylight, the strict solidarity between economic power and political power that provides the combined configuration of urban policy and urban economics, simultaneously.

12. If the city itself produces mechanisms of power conducive to the appropriation of resources; and if it constitutes a space geared to the affirmation of legitimacies and symbolic values, the struggle for the city may – indeed, should – be the struggle for this set of resources of which it is both the origin and the recipient, eternalizing mechanisms of reproduction geared to exploitation and domination.[1]

To be sure, each city implements, in a unique manner, an articulation of mechanisms of accumulation that are specifically urban, strategies of local domination, as well as modes of symbolic affirmation for specific groups and their values and perspectives. And only detailed studies of the coalitions of power may reveal the extent and nature of each one of the mechanisms that exist in each particular city.

13. By the same token, since a city does not exist in isolation, the strategies of domination and accumulation that characterize it cannot be perceived without an assessment of its regional, national, and – now more than ever before – international articulations. In what ways are dominant local coalitions articulated horizontally and vertically? As pressure groups and class segments, what position do they occupy, and how do they interact with the hegemonic bloc at the national level? To which global networks is the city connected, and how is this connection upheld?

14. As a rule, at least in the most prominent cities, local coalitions involve a broad spectrum ranging from traditional local interest groups all the way to external groups, both national and foreign. How much weight do these various groups carry? What is the role of the segments that make up the traditional middle classes? And what about the old oligarchies?

To summarize the present argument, one could say that each city is, therefore, the field as well as the object of relations geared to the generation and appropriation of resources – material, political, and symbolic – that result from particularly unique forms that structure

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power and economic relations. The sum total of such relations – together with the resources that they set in motion and vie for – make up a vast space for real changes in the lives of the social classes and groups occupying the lower echelons of society that are subject to discrimination, thus leading to a significant reduction in urban inequality.

The slogan chosen by the organizers of the Urban Social Forum, parallel to the 5th World Urban Forum spearheaded by UN-Habitat, perhaps adequately expresses the understanding of the interconnection of multiple levels that challenges the urban struggles: *"In the neighborhoods and in the world, the struggle towards the right for the city, for urban democracy and justice."*

III. URBAN STRUGGLES: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

15. Neither a universe closed by structural (global) over-determinations, nor a field that is totally open for the construction of alternatives, the "local" and, first of all, the city constitute the scale and arena for the construction of trans-scale strategies and political agents that are apt to operate in an articulated manner with coalitions and alliances at multiple levels.

That means that, more than a necessity, it is possible to break away from the fatalism that seeks to force our cities to adapt to the impositions of a ruthless globalization that subjects the "local" to the requirements of the large corporations, thrusting them into merciless competition, a true war of all against everybody – a war in which the winners are only the beneficiaries of exemptions, favors, and benefits offered to attract investments, mega events, and tourists.

Likewise, that means the rejection of a certain structuralist determinism, which is also economicist, which views the "local" as a merely passive recipient and concrete synthesis of the abstract determinations of the logic of global capital, and also of new geopolitical approaches that are purportedly radical which, by mocking local or national struggles, do not envision an enemy other than an abstract, imperial power, with no center or place, intangible, and therefore unassailable.

16. The fact is that reality exceeds – and should re-qualify – the theoretical or ideological debate; for the unquestionable truth is that there are many urban struggles, all of them significant and diverse. Over the course of the history of modern society, the city has been an extraordinarily rich space for social experimentation, for the emergence of new and creative forms of sociability, for ceaseless manifestations of a popular culture which, by challenging dramatic living conditions, irrigates and renews the cultural patrimony of mankind. Moreover, it is the place for what Lefebvre called "experimental utopias"; that is, alternative lifestyles that point to the possibility of a new pattern of social organization, dreams fulfilled in a limited space and time, yet sufficient to state that a new city is indeed possible.

17. That wealth and that creativity reside, to a large extent, within the urban social fabric, in those neighborhoods that seldom receive urban services; neither parties nor labor unions, not even the most curious among our university researchers. These are emerging

dynamics erupting, which feed into popular struggles and organizations, into the manifestations of groups discriminated against, and thus contribute to the vitality of the city.

More often than not, though, those experiences, struggles, requests, claims, and cultural manifestations remain isolated, segmented, fragments of a social life that seems unable to reach its fullest extent. They face great difficulties in order to generate broader dynamics and gain access to the social and urban space in its entirety.

18. In this reality that is at once local, regional, national, and global, configuring a context of permanent conflict, in which new struggles, claims, and social projects emerge in a creative fashion, what would be the place and role of local assemblies or councils? What is the role and place of the city council member, that parliament member that sees him/herself as the expression of that extraordinary vitality that points to a new, possible city?

There are no simple answers. Nor can we imagine one single answer for all countries, all cities, or all spatial and temporal settings. It would be possible, however, to attempt some reflections and general guidelines for this debate.

IV. THE CHALLENGES TO PARLIAMENTARY ACTION

19. In a concise manner, it would be possible to say that parliamentary institutions are faced with three daunting challenges.

The first challenge stems from the dominant urban project, which tries to impose a pattern of urban policies and planning that mirrors the private sector; rather, the large corporations, a phenomenon that could be referred to as "urban private-sectorization." The attempt to treat the city as though it was a private enterprise neglects political practices and actions as a whole, and parliamentary action in particular. Viewed as an enterprise, the city becomes the target and the arena for a systematic policy of "de-politicization" of the urban question. Its ideal model is not the city of conscientious, critical, and active citizens, but rather the city of clients, consumers or shareholders; worse yet, the city of passive spectators of mega events.

20. The transformation of the city into a business moves all decision-making processes away from the public space – by definition the space of politics – to the sphere of the so-called public-private partnerships, and that represents the first great challenge, since it calls into question once again the forms of constitution and legitimacy of power in the city. Hence, for example, an event promoted by the World Bank simply suggested delegating local power directly to capitalist entrepreneurs, without mediators: "*The private sector should take the lead in local economic strategies*" (Urban Partnership & The TWU Urban Division, 1998, p. 4).

In this city-enterprise, a bizarre form of direct democracy ruled by capital, there is no room for debate or democracy. Debate and dissent may threaten the proper functioning of business. For that very reason, the charismatic, entrepreneurial, and centralizing mayor begins to turn into a role model, as suggested by well-known Catalan consultants who are

selling the Barcelona model all over the world. Thus, for example, in a document that gained great repercussion in the world of urban planning, concerned about ensuring the continuity and stability of municipal-entrepreneurial management, those theorists of strategic urban planning advocate the *"suppression of the hurdles to reelection and/or the extension of terms from four to six years"* (Castells & Borja, 1996, p. 164). Going further in his defense of the idea of banning politics from urban life, Borja argues that there is no reason that justifies political-ideological disputes in the city, and goes on to say that *"it would be desirable if political parties would refrain from running as such in municipal elections"* (Borja, 1995, p. 26).

21. Such deliberate, overt de-politicization of urban life becomes a compliment to the charismatic, personalistic mayor, whose authoritarian penchant is evident. Therefore, in a publication financed by the Habitat Agency, one reads that *"Lisboa, under Sampaio, and Barcelona, under the emblematic figure of Maragall, are good examples <...> it will be hard to find a positive answer in the absence of a personalized leadership and, in many cases, the figure of mayors is decisive"* (Castells & Borja, 1996, p. 156). More recently, it was UN-Habitat itself that extolled, quite unabashedly, the virtues of personalism that emasculates citizenship and conjures up some totalitarian nightmares witnessed by humanity in the 20th century, ascribing the success of some cities in "reducing poverty" to the fact that they *"have benefited from visionary mayors and political leaders who have radically transformed city landscapes…"* (UN-Habitat, 2008).

22. Finally, it would be worth remembering that the normative action traditionally fulfilled by local parliamentary institutions, responsible for master plans and the regulation of soil use, was weakened – at times completely emptied – by urban "flexibilization," whose goal is to bestow upon the mayor freedom to negotiate with private enterprises and real estate developers case by case, distributing urban exemptions that fragment the city and subject it definitively to the immediate appetite of such private entrepreneurs or developers.

23. Once displaced from the center of the decision-making process by entrepreneurial patterns of management as well as personal, charismatic – and almost always authoritarian – styles of government, parliamentarians are often pushed to the sphere of what we would call the segmented management of private interests and, in the most egregious cases, to "clientelism" plain and simple.

Well, in a city led by capitalist entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial, charismatic and authoritarian mayors, practices of patronage and clientelism end up deepening the process of "de-politicization." Even when the interests represented are legitimate and the causes are fair, this segmentation compromises any prospects of generating the collective dynamics that may challenge the status quo.

Surely, overcoming the multiple and differentiated forms of clientelism and segmentation represents the second great challenge facing parliamentary action in the city.

24. The third challenge has its roots in the emerging dynamics, struggles, and claims of social movements. In fact, once they are confronted with the authoritarianism of the

urban marketing espoused by the entrepreneurial mayor, on the one hand, and clientelistic practices on the other, social movements lose faith in the traditional forms of representation and fight for direct democracy.

The general feeling is that assemblies and municipal councils have lost meaning and power, and do not constitute – even today – audiences capable of echoing claims, projects, proposals, and wishes... let alone dreams. And the claims for direct democracy become that much stronger when the movements and organizations of civil society gain increased vitality.

Faced with such a picture, many parliamentarians view the pressures for forms of direct democracy as a direct threat to the exercise of a mandate that was legally and legitimately bestowed upon them by voters.

25. Undoubtedly, there are parliamentarians that seek – and many succeed in that task – to devote their political careers to those emerging dynamics, thus becoming spokespeople for such struggles. The truth of the matter is, however, that even the members of this minority experience the angst of being the "odd ball" when they talk about the daily lives of citizens and the struggles of social movements in parliament, just as they do when they talk about parliamentary action at popular gatherings.

26. The picture presented above does not warrant any optimism and threaten local assemblies with irrelevance. Those that succumb neither to clientelism nor to irrelevance must exert strenuous efforts in order to foster the reinvention of local parliamentary practices and institutions. To achieve that end, it would be possible to suggest some steps.

V. REINVENTING THE ACTIONS OF PARLIAMENTARIANS

27. As the first step, local assemblies must overcome the defensive attitude which, in the name of a theoretical philosophical or legal prevalence of representative democracy, ends up forcing them to overlook new emerging political actors and reject the breath of fresh air that these might stand for. The doors of assemblies and councils must be flung wide open – in figurative and concrete terms. They must be turned into permanent venues for the exercise of citizenship, as well as for social movements and their claims.

28. This opening of spaces would entail as a necessary complement the engagement of assemblies or municipal councils in stimulating, promoting, and participating in all possible forms of direct democracy. Thus, for example, with respect to participative budgets and citizen councils of various kinds, sharing responsibilities and powers with these emerging forms constitutes not only a sign of commitment to representative democracy, but also an indispensable way towards the revitalization of parliamentary life.

Instead of thinking about direct democracy and representative democracy as antagonistic forms, it is possible to conceive of them as complementary – albeit different – forms of expression and defense of the legitimate interests of citizens. Alliances of this type strengthen the main fight, whose overarching target is the process of "de-politicization" of the city and its advocates. Furthermore, the occasional loss of some legal prerogatives, which are increasingly formal and less substantive, will have as a counterpart the

reaffirmation of politics, viewed as the public debate and actions revolving around the collective interest – always fraught with conflicts and contradictions.

29. The second step, which harks back to the relations between councils and mayors, imposes the staunch defense of the existence of rules and standards for soil use and city planning. As mentioned previously, one of the central characteristics of entrepreneurial neo-urbanism is its aversion to plans and rules. Everything that may hinder market freedom is seen as unacceptable state meddling, so much so that the market is conceived, according to the manuals of neoclassic economic thought and neo-liberal political thought, as the most effective way to allocate resources and capable of self-regulation. In the dominant view, the State and the plan must not be at the service of the market, and must therefore be flexible so as to allow all potential business opportunities to come to fruition.

30. Well, after 25 years in which master plans have been weakened and rules have been made more flexible in order to pave the way for "market-friendly planning," coupled with pro-growth developmental strategies, failure stares us in the face; at least as regards the fight against poverty and inequality. Although it insists on the virtues of pro-growth developmental strategies and though it argues – in a somewhat misleading manner – that the reduction of inequalities would favor such strategies, UN-Habitat has been forced to recognize and regret that this combination has not occurred and that cities are becoming more unequal.

> *"Unfortunately, rising economic growth rates in several African countries have not reduced income or consumption disparities; on the contrary, urban inequalities in many African cities, including Maputo, Nairobi and Abidjan, remain high as wealth becomes more concentrated"* (UN-Habitat, 2008).

And, with respect to Latin America, the diagnosis is equally unfavorable: *"Urban inequalities in this highly unequal region are not only increasing, but are becoming more entrenched <...>* (UN-Habitat, 2008).

31. Those who until a short while ago used to think of planning and regulatory intervention by the State as a threat to private initiative and the proper functioning of the market – and, as a result, of the city – have come to their senses in the midst of the world's financial crisis, whose roots lie in urban speculation; better still, in the commoditization of the city in an era of unhindered financial dealings.

Hence, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat, after reiterating old criticisms against regulation defended by those that still cling to the "old forms of master planning", declares that "governments should increasingly take a more central role in cities and towns" (UN-Habitat, 2009, p. vi). Although she did not engage in clear self-criticism of earlier positions, she is sufficiently explicit when she acknowledges that it took a crisis of enormous dimensions for the place and role of the State to be reconsidered:

> *"This, to a large extent, is a result of the current global economic crisis, which has exposed the limits of the private sector – in terms of its resilience and future growth, as well as the ability of the 'market' to solve most urban problems"* (UN-Habitat, 2009, p. vi).

32. Had it not been for the human tragedies involved, such as massive unemployment, the destitution triggered by the crisis, and millions of homeless people even in the countries of the so-called "core," one could welcome the crisis and say that, at the very least, it brought some sense to those who labeled as "irrational" and "visionary" the people that sent out warnings about the inability of the market to regulate itself and about the perverse effects of surrendering the city to the pure logic and dynamics of the market.

33. But what matters is that the intellectual and political context has shifted substantially, opening new and unforeseen opportunities to discuss and redefine the place and role of the State in urban development and, as a result, also the place and role of the legislative branch of government in the cities. The need for state intervention, at the present juncture, seems to be an almost unquestionable consensus, even though it is always a good idea to keep in mind that there are myriad ways to design it.

Many people view it in light of the paradigm of the trillions of dollars that the public sector channeled to banks and speculators in financial dire straits, an order of magnitude that had never been dreamt of before in the most ambitious "poverty relief" programs drafted by well-paid technicians in their comfortable offices at the World Bank and other multilateral agencies. Nonetheless, at the present juncture, it is possible to link the calls for greater state accountability and less room for maneuver for the free market to calls for social control of the public sector, coupled with wider and more effective forms of direct democracy.

34. In that regard, we would reaffirm the need to recover for the public sector and for legislators, in cooperation with – and under the control of – organizations of civil society through their emerging forms of direct democracy, the legitimate power to engage in city planning, submitting to the public interest – that is, to the search for equality and social justice – the economic inefficiency and social perversity of private and speculative interests that prevail in the free market.

VI. ANOTHER PARLIAMENTARY ACTION IS POSSIBLE

35. The streets and buildings of our cities bring together and, in a certain way, constitute a narrative of conflict and confrontation carried out in the course of their trajectories. Nothing that today seems to be absolutely natural to us, like that welcoming square replete with shade or that noisy and foggy expressway that cuts through poor neighborhoods marked by decay; each place in our cities is a hallmark of the struggles of those that preceded us, of their accomplishments... but also of their failures.

The city – more so than any other piece of human labor – is a historical artifact. And, as such, it is open to the future.

36. The pressure of dominant interests to submit the city to their private interests is confronted by the resistance of those who want to affirm their wishes for citizenship, democracy, social justice, and social responsibility. In the view of the latter, the only possible way is that of collective action, politics, the building of public spaces and democratic processes in which they will come into contact and interact – in an open and

legitimate manner – with all the plans and projects. Their strength lies in open, public debate, in multiple forms of participation and collective action.

37. Local parliamentary institutions and those that work in them may play an important role towards recovering the public space, reaffirming the place and role of the regulatory actions and intervention by the State in the defense of the public interest. To that end, they will have to reinvent their forms of action, their relations with the local executive branch of government as well as civil society, their movements, and organizations.

The rekindling of urban struggles just about everywhere, coupled with the evident failure of the prescriptions of the neo-liberal city – the competitive city-enterprise, the business-minded city – opens up new possibilities. More than ever before, a NEW CITY IS POSSIBLE. In this city, it will be necessary to acknowledge that a NEW PARLIAMENTARY ACTION IS ALSO POSSIBLE.

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