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Urban Commons and the Right to Ambiance: Gentrification Policies and Urban Social Movements in Barcelona, Athens and Istanbul

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Abstract. *While the last years the discussion on urban commons is becoming increasingly popular among urban scholars, there have been few attempts to think it together with the notion of ambiance. During the current rising tide of urban revolts, the rebels do not just claim the urban space from the sovereign power but they occupy and tend to transform it to common space. In parallel, neoliberal urban policies tend to appropriate both the city ambiance and the common space, through gentrification policies. Consequently the discourse on common space has to be reconsidered and to be connected with the right to ambiance, as the latter is becoming the hybrid arena of cultural, gender, political and social urban conflicts.*

Keywords: *urban commons, right to the ambiance, gentrification*

Introduction

Over the past few years, the discussion on urban commons and new enclosures revolves mainly around Marxist geographers' approaches that focus on the 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2012, Hodkinson, 2012) and conceptualise commons as a new version of the 'right to the city' (Brenner et al., 2009, Mayer, 2009). However, during the current rising tide of urban revolts, the rebels do not just claim the urban space from the sovereign power but they occupy and tend to transform it to common space. In parallel, neoliberal urban policies tend to appropriate both the city ambiance and the common space, through gentrification policies that seek to improve the competitiveness of the cities. Consequently the discourse on common space has to be reconsidered and to be connected with the right to ambiance, as the latter is becoming the hybrid arena of cultural, gender, political and social urban conflicts.

Within this optic, in this paper the common space is considered in a Lefebvrian (1991/1974) trialectic conceptualisation as perceived - conceived - lived space, spatial practice - representations of space - representational space, and it is employed a framework based on postcolonial (Roy, 2011) and intersectional approaches (Lykke, 2010). In doing this, it is surpassed the dichotomies between North/South, West/East and it is examined the intersectional spatialities of race, sex, class and culture. This way of thinking allows me to rethink the complex production of city ambiance and to explore the crossings, interferences and diffractions of the multiple systems of domination, oppression and discrimination.

Based on this theoretical context the common space does not only concern the physical space but also the representations of space and the representational space in which the ambiance plays a crucial role. The perception of ambiance is not only shaped by the material and geographical dimension of cities, but also from the historical representations, the daily life, the social vitality, the modes of communication, the social relations, the sense of memory and the ideological and political space (Amphoux, et al 2004, Tribaud, 2011).

In order to unsettle this view I examine the contested urban ambiance and the emerging common space in Barcelona, Athens and Istanbul, three cities that are situated across the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in-between Global North and Global South, hence they constituted a catchy and intriguing case study in order to be examined in parallel and in comparison.

The Barcelona model, civismo and city branding

In Barcelona, since the early 80s, began a concerted effort of radical regeneration of the city, which received the dual expression of the so-called 'Modelo de Barcelona' for the city's development prospects and the 'Civismo Rules' which regulates the mode of communication of residents and visitors.

The 'Modelo de Barcelona' was enshrined with the organisation of global events such as the Olympic Games (1992) and the Forum of Cultures (2004) as well as with numerous gentrification projects. In the early '90s the municipality authorities displayed the city with slogans like 'Come to the largest urban project in Europe', 'The greatest concentration of public works in Europe' and the main goal was the promotion of the city ambiance and image, a method which will then become known as the Barcelona model. The public - private partnerships and the shift in the cultural sector will dominate the '90s. The construction of the Centre of Modern Culture (CCCB), the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) and numerous cultural activities aimed to enhance the city image and to attract both tourists and investors. Consequently Barcelona during the decades of '90s and '00s became the global archetype for the implementation of the so-called "city branding" policies. Simultaneously, during the same period, Barcelona was synonymous with the alternative culture and promoted as the ideal city for students, intellectuals, artists and bohemians. Street musicians, immigrants, jugglers, bazaars and social centers shape the image of lively, open, cosmopolitan city, which the municipality authorities advantage to attract tourists and the so-called "creative class" (Delgado, 2007).

However since the late 90s, the city branding policies was changed. Barcelona has climbed the global cities hierarchy and therefore it is directed towards investments and tourists with high economic potential. The alliance between the authorities, investors and the middle class had as a result the intensification of the gentrification processes, with massive evictions and demolitions of political squats, criminalisation of migrants, sex workers and other "undesirable" groups. In the "renewed ambiance" of the city it is not desirable the alternative youth, migrants, street musicians and artists that were for at least two decades the "advertisement" of the city. The gentrification seems to be completed and the neoliberalisation of Barcelona will be completed with the "Civismo Rules", which passed by the City Council in January 2006 and has as its stated goal "to safeguard social coexistence and civismo

in public space of the city” (cited in Chatzi, 2009:81). In fact it is a list of unacceptable behaviours in the public spaces as well as financial penalties for the so-called “violators”.

Consequently it can be argued that the liberalisation of Barcelona is linked to the competition for integration of the city in the global hierarchy, the particular shift in usurping the so-called “cultural capital” with a focus on world events and the adoption of the “city branding” policies. In fact Barcelona has managed to become the pioneer in the promotion of the city as a logo and as a commercial brand and this is achieved both with the stigmatisation of undesired groups and the entrepreneurial gentrification of the city.

Athens: From the “Olympic euphoria” to the city of crisis

In the mid-1990s, Athens experienced a period of remarkable growth, through the adoption of neoliberal urban policies. The urban development projects of this period included the hosting of mega-events and massive gentrification projects. All these served as catalysts for the central goal of this period, that is the reinforcement of Athens’ position in the inter-urban competition in the E.U.. More specifically, Athens experienced a period of a general ‘euphoria’ during the early ‘00s. The improvement of the city’s ambiance and image was succeeded through mega-projects, but it simultaneously allowed a number of “cleanance operations” against vulnerable groups such as immigrants, homeless people and drug addicts.

However, since 2008, Greece has been hit by an unprecedented turmoil, which is expressed socially, economically and spatially. After entering the “supportive” mechanism of the so-called “Troika” (IMF, European Central Bank, European Commission), Greek governments imposed severe austerity measures. The basic goal of the new reforms is the development of an appealing environment-ambiance and a flexible framework for large-scale investments. Within this context, new urban policies such as gentrification and fast track policies, commodification and privatisation of public infrastructures were introduced. Moreover, the crisis was expressed biopolitically, targeting the bodies and the existence of certain population groups. For instance, the “operation of purity and integrity” of the Greek government in 2012 in the center of Athens functioned as the basis for the castigation of the HIV-positive women and drug users. It can be argued that Athens transformed from a city that discovered its metropolitan lifestyle with gentrified areas through its multicultural development, it turned to be presented as a ghetto and a highly polarised city, with the basic “problem” being the immigrants without papers, the leftist and anarchist-squatters and other “undesired” population groups.

Against the above policies several urban social movements experimented with new forms of spatial practices and struggles that unfold both in physical and social space. More specifically, the last decade was a period of experiments in (re) production, massive struggles, and hundreds strikes against austerity measures happened. The two intense moments of the December 2008 riots and the 2011 Indignant Squares operated as driving forces for the production of the common space and the right to ambiance across the urban fabric of Athens.

During December 2008 as a response to the police killing of Alexis Grigoropoulos, thousands of activists demonstrated in the centre of Athens, erecting barricades and occupying key public buildings. Although the motive was the killing of the young boy, it immediately turned to an uprising struggling for the right to free expression in

“free” public spaces. As Petropoulou (2010:217) mentions December 2008 uprising was “possibly the first urban uprising for free time and free expression in free space”. From the December 2008 and onwards, the “urban justice” discourse was put in the centre of social movements. The mobilisations are attained a strong urban character as they were translated into the right to re-appropriate urban space ambiance through the occupation of state and municipal buildings, such as schools or universities (Tsavdaroglou and Makrygianni, 2013). As a response to the shrinkage of the welfare state a number of urban and social (re) productive structures and commoning procedures emerged. The first symbolic appearance of this plural character of socio-spatial commoning was the Indignados movement, during the summer of 2011 in the two months occupation of Syntagma Square. Its significance lies exactly at the fact that it put urban space at the centre of the political practice and gave birth to new imaginaries.

But what is the legacy of these moments of urban uprisings, such as the December 2008 and the Indignant squares of 2011? The spirit of these revolts did not only included the spectacular clashes with the police but it centrally focused on imagining and performing a different urban reality (Stavrides, 2014). Through these, people commenced to experiment with different ways of being-in-common in the urban space and to materialise radical ambiances and imaginaries of collective re-appropriation of everyday life.

Istanbul neoliberal urbanism and Gezi Park occupation

In the words of the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan (2011): “with the new convention, sports and cultural centers, we prepare this beautiful city for the modern future in this historic location. At the same time we are investing to transform Istanbul into a global financial center” (cited in Azem, 2012). The transformation of Istanbul into a global city gradually began in the “80s and has intensified over the past two decades.

At first, the driving force of the city’s economy became the large constructions and the gentrification projects. The gentrification policies started in the historical part of the city where massive demolitions took place and fires were put to the old wooden houses. Since then, hundreds of buildings have been demolished and only a few of them rebuilt with concrete and wood paneling as representations of the old Ottoman roads. It is about ‘an urban scenography’ with the sole aim to attract tourists. Today the gentrification policies include the dispossession of poor families, migrants and the criminalisation of sex workers and other ‘undesired’ groups. In parallel the so-called ‘gated communities’ in the perimeter of the city multiplied. Besides their references to safety and comfortability, one of their particular features is that their advertisement is complemented by nostalgic references of the supposed lost past of Istanbul. Indicative of this is the following quotation: ‘Some of us miss our homes in gardens, some of us those selective five o’clock teas, some of us our childhood parks (...) Now there is Alkent which combines all these beauties with modern comfort, brings back together what everyone misses’ (cited in Öncü 1997: 62). Following the above quote it became clear that the emerging gated communities are a new enclosed common space which seeks to be attractive, inter alia, through the usurpation of the ambiance of memory in the form of representation.

Finally, it should be noted that the above spatial enclosures are enriched with the so-called ‘Islamic Neoliberalism’, which has particularly gender dimension. The most

characteristic expression of the new policies is the model of the 'Holy Islamic Family' according to which the position of the women is at home; either in the gated communities or in the TOKI buildings, that replace the slums areas.

The above intersectional enclosures" policies do not stayed unchallenged, as several urban social movements are struggling against the multiply systems of domination. Undoubtedly, the most emblematic moment was the social uprising of June 2013, in response to the government's intention to destroy the park Gezi, one of last green spaces in the center of the city, and to build a new shopping center. According to the network of urban social movements "Müşterekler" (2013): "Gezi resistance was a rebellion where we said a high-toned 'We Reject!' to the confiscation of our common spaces". It can be argued that the environmental issue was the opportunity to connect the various urban social movements in order to express their opposition to the various neoliberal urban enclosures (Kuymulu, 2013).

Specifically, the oppression of homosexuals, the large-scale urban projects and the gentrification policies, the government authoritarianism, the displacement of slums residents, the free speech censorship, the policies of the "Holy Islamic Family", are some of the reasons that led a multitude of people to participate in the Gezi park uprising. However, the protesters were not limited to the confrontation with the state, as they tried to negotiate and to go beyond the cultural, class, racial and gender identities setting up unique and hybrid social relations.

In the words of the protestor Şehriban Karabulut, member of the lgbt bloc: "I am a feminist. I am both Alevi and Kurdish and gay (...). As LGBT we have been here from day one because we didn't want the trees to be cut down. As lgbt communities, we are always treated as the 'other'. We are here in order to show our existence and visibility. (...) The people are very warm towards each other, and there is a great sense of solidarity" (in Jourdan and Maeckelbergh, 2013).

At the same time, the protestors' action repertoires, mode of communication and commoning practices included, among others, dance fest, piano nights, yoga training, a self-organised library, open lectures, a social health center, a vegetable garden, a playground, a botanical garden, collective sleeping places, a social kitchen and many more components of a self-sufficient commune life.

Conclusion

In the era of the current global crisis, Barcelona, Athens and Istanbul balance between the neoliberal city and the rebel city and new geographical imaginaries emerge. On the one hand they aspire to become 'global', 'entrepreneurial', 'resilient' or 'creative' as well as they are figured as exemplary places for neoliberal urban projects, which include, among others, gentrification, forced evictions, gigantic projects and city branding policies. Simultaneously, they constitute the epicenter of riots and rebels, that push the boundaries over the symbolic, material and social meanings of the common space and the right to ambiance.

Closing, it is undeniable that there are many further issues to be explored, however I maintain that writing with this kind of ambition may be open politico-intellectual imaginations in ways that have generated new questions and possibilities for future theoretical intervention. Moreover, I hope that my approach will be useful for critical scholars in discussing the future developments on the production of the common space and the right to ambiance.

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