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Investigating the “Climate Subjectivation” in Urban Furnaces

Sensitive Experiences of Climate Change in French Cities and Reconsidered Ecological Commitment

Fabian LEVEQUE¹, Karl BERTHELOT²

Abstract. Since they concentrate a growing majority of the world population, cities largely contribute to climate change... as they suffer from it. The singular experience of living with climate change in cities is barely considered in urban environmental policies. They are usually in favour of expertise solutions. The survey *Living in the urban furnaces* investigates the sensitive experience of the inhabitants in five cities in the South of France. By using the term “climate subjectivation,” the authors seek to refer to the process describing how climate change, by affecting sensitive, ordinary life may induce reconsidered political and ecological relation to the inhabited milieu of life. Simultaneously, other ways of being ecologically committed emerge in this process.

Keywords. *Metropolises, Climate Change, Subjectivation, Ecological Commitment*

Introduction

As a response to climate change, metropolitan policies opt for technological, engineering, architectural solutions to accelerate the resilience of cities and the transition of sustainable lifestyles (Terrin and Marie, 2015). A series of article recently published in the *Guardian* emphasised the limits of such actions and the inequalities they often reinforce.

According to Faburel (2013), the dominance of expertise in urban environmental policies immediately disqualifies entire parts of the inhabited experience of the individual subject. Roux (2004) argued this experience helps to consider the mutual, affective relation we maintain with the territories and demonstrate that individual is inseparable of inhabited place. Yet, this way of considering otherwise the urban experience echoes the numerous works on aesthetic and sensitive experiences which deeper examine this mutual relation (Manola, 2012). Blanc (2012) has demonstrated other relational and sensitive conceptions of ecology are possible by exploring the notion of “milieu de vie” [living environment]. It helps to overcome the instrumental approaches of nature. Thibaud (2018) has recently highlighted the concept of ambiance to inform the conditions that make possible the multiple, sensitive experiences of the individuals with their urban *milieu de vie*. This concept helps to understand how the transformations of the world take shape in our ordinary, situated experiences. It mainly shows the strong attachments to the inhabited milieu, particularly when this latter is suddenly in peril. The recent works of the research centre Pacte has pointed out the sensitive experience informs differently contemporary climate crisis by giving rise to other situated knowledges (Durand, 2014).

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The term of “climatic subjectivation” helped to encapsulate this process in the survey *Living in the urban furnaces*. The authors hypothesise climate change is now part of the ambiance of the sensitive experiences of urban environments. By unequally affecting the sensitive life of social groups (Theys, 2007), climate change is on the verge to act as a *medium for reflexivity*. The sociologist Martuccelli (2017, 86) has referred to the “ordinary implicative affectivity” to argue that individuals would be more and more affected, consciously, or not, by the upheavals occurring in the world. This affectivity would give rise to feelings of indignation, humiliation, or injustice. These transformations of the lived world would lead to a new ecological, social and political “concern” (Brunet, 2008). As a matter of fact, it would give rise to multiple and ordinary resistances (Dobré, 2002), differing from traditional militancy. Tarragoni (2016) argued such a process would pave the way to reconsidered political subjectivations: given that the ratio of power responsible for the destruction of the inhabited milieu, other political conceptions of individual would thus be at stake in these multiple resistances. The meaning of “climate subjectivation” will continue to be detailed in the body of the paper through the findings of the survey.

The survey took place in summer 2019 in two medium-sized cities (Narbonne, Nîmes) and metropolises (Marseilles, Montpellier, Toulouse) in the South of France. It questioned the affective and sensitive experiences to the milieu of life through (1) the perception of climate change in cities, (2) the political means to act and (3) the ecological commitments to re-examine. 130 semi-open interviews were conducted following a representative sample of the population in these cities. It was organized by the UMR Triangle on behalf of the non-governmental organization “Notre affaire à tous.”

A Widely Shared Impression of Inhabiting “Urban Furnaces”

When Climate Change Affects Urban Daily Life

Seventy percent of the respondents say to observe climate evolutions in the cities they live. The usual rhythm of season is said to be altered. Abrupt changes and sudden extreme heat waves are the noteworthy evolutions of climate change. They are often reported by referring to personal stories from childhood. Climate change is already experienced in everyday life with tangible effects in cities.

Heat waves are particularly extreme in (major) cities since they concentrate people, activities and buildings. About 56% of the respondents assert the increase of summer temperature has noticeably influenced on their lifestyles. They say slowing down their pace of daily life, by reducing their daily activities. They say to feel more tired for not being able to recover at night. In short, rhythms of life are adjusted to vital needs. In densifying metropolitan areas, the parks and green spaces become scarce. It is less easy to relax and avoid the bustle of cities in summer. Consequently, it would be more tough to experience heat waves episodes in cities. The air is said to be stifling. The lexical field of *asphyxia* and *suffocation* is pervading in habitants’ words, not only in major cities but also in the medium-sized cities of the survey:

“Here, it is hot, you take a risk on falling to the ground. It is an urban canyon. The wind isn’t blowing. These changes are unhealthy” (resident in Nîmes, Male, between 30 and 44 years old, unemployed).

Climate change has serious effects on bodies and health conditions. The increasing temperatures concentrate polluting particles in the air. Inhabitants assure they contracted asthma during heat waves since they moved in town. Others assert how

harsh urban life is during summer, including in medium-sized cities:

"I'm asthmatic too and climate change is wearing me out. I've been taking pills for two days, but I don't feel well. Sometimes, I've asthma attacks"
(resident of Saint-Jean Saint-Pierre district, Narbonne, between 30 and 44 years old, unemployed).

These feelings clearly depend on the age, social background and physiological conditions. They can also vary according to the residential trajectory of the inhabitants. The sunny and warm weather is evocative of the typical lifestyle of the South of France. The easy access to cooling areas, such as sea, rivers and inland regions, clearly help to moderate the impression of urban furnaces. But for how long?

Anxiety and Anger are the Underlying Effects of Climate Change

More than two third of the respondents assert they are emotionally affected by the effects of climate change. They fear the lack of water, the repeated droughts, and the rise of heat. They also say to be in anger to be unable to do something. A young resident of the Cabucelle district in Marseilles, desperately shares: "It moves me a lot, I'm sad, it makes me angry sometimes. When you tell yourself that there is nothing you can do, that it will be hard... Sometimes we say that we almost reach an impasse."

These feelings do not always address personal situations. They also feel compassion for the less advantaged person and climate migrants. They feel sorry for future generations' living conditions.

The Sensitive Experience of Climate Change Reveals a Reflexive Concern for the Urban Living Condition

An Unbearable Degradation of Inhabited Environments

According to inhabitants, these affects are related to the morphological characteristics of cities and their recent processes of densification of open spaces. Among the respondents, 76% assert having noticed changes in their living environments - 43% of them notice their surroundings densifying with new buildings erected on vacant lot. Densification is indirectly blamed for the degradation of urban living conditions. It also affects climate perceptions, more particularly during heat waves in the mineralised areas of disadvantaged areas. "It feels like being in a heat tank. The concrete reflects the heat" said a resident of La Bagatelle, a disadvantaged district in Toulouse.

Vacant lots are increasingly densified and green spaces are noticeably disappearing:

"Montpellier changes very, very quickly and build too much. All the open spaces are densified. I think we're going too fast and too far. A lot of people feel it right now" (resident of Ecusson district, Montpellier, Female, between 45 and 59 years old, craftsperson).

Even Nîmes and Narbonne are not spared from urban projects of artificialisation in their close fringes. A growing feeling of discontent is pervading about urban living environments. One third of the respondents argue they would move to inland regions of France if the degradation of their lived environments were persisting.

Climate Change Reinforces Socio-Ecological Injustices in Metropolitan Cities

The inhabitants criticize metropolitan attraction projects such as the innovation pole Cambaceres in Montpellier or the shopping centre project called Val Tolosa in Toulouse. Other projects are said to gentrify central districts of Marseilles. Inhabitants also point at policies promoting mass tourism instead of upgrading the inhabitants living conditions.

About 88% of the respondents acknowledge feeling injustice. These urban decisions refer to a hierarchy of political choices and, as a result, of public and territories concerned. Some people directly allude to spatial disparities about green spaces or public transportation that would be more concentrated in well-off districts. The unequal exposure to climate change effects is obvious for people living in highly mineralised districts. Furthermore, a dilapidated building stock and inhabitants experiencing difficulties are obstacles for the ecological conversion of lifestyles. Inhabitants obviously feel concerned about the urban degradation of places they live and say to feel powerless about it.

The Attachments for the Inhabited Milieu Urge on Alternative Ecological Commitments

A Critical Distancing From Political Institutions to Deal With Ecological Issues

Adopting eco-friendly practices were often stated as ecological commitments, such as recycling, changing eating habits, travelling differently and even changing career. Yet, this eco-citizenship discourse, which is repeatedly encouraged by the public authorities, is the subject of fierce criticism. A resident of Montpellier argues: "I try to do my best to adopt eco-friendly habits, but at the same time, it's an issue that I don't completely understand. I actually feel like we're overwhelmed by the problem."

About 36% of the respondents state not being involved in ecological issues. Changing individual practices is said to be pointless, compared to unwilling political actions and economic policies which would not envision any convincing alternative. Standards of eco-friendly behaviours also prevail working-class groups without considering their living conditions.

Furthermore, some inhabitants assert they distrust political institutions to deal with ecological issues. Ecology would be diverted from its social and political essence to promote 'green capitalism' projects. As a result, political organisations and methods of production and consumption are not called into question. This diversion reinforces a feeling of mistrust regarding political institutions. An inhabitant of Marseilles points at the passivity of the public authorities: "Politicians only take part to a movement that goes beyond them. They are totally powerless today. They are incapable of thinking differently about economy, about value creation, about the measure of wealth. It's discouraging..."

Desires to Reclaim the Milieu With Other Political Forms-of-Life

Most inhabitants of this survey confess to feel powerless confronted to the degradation of their lived environments by metropolitan policies. They also regret the absence of serious political commitments to slow the effects of climate change. These stands clearly testify a reflexive concern about the global ecological situation. This concern is undoubtedly related to tangible, sensitive experiences of this situation.

By taking a closer look, we witnessed desires to act and commit otherwise, outside of conventional political frameworks, which are said to be restrictive. Some collective

of inhabitants ecologically reclaim their milieu of life, by gardening, cleaning beaches or implementing solidarity initiatives. They take care of places and people they live with. Thus, mutual assistance and solidarity are values they want to share, rather than competition or predation.

In Marseilles, several residents rallied around to implement the “Conservatoire Marseillais de la Menthe” in the middle of the street. It is a self-organised project which encourages passers-by to take mint. There is no financial compensation, only the possibility of taking some leaves or even a cutting. This plant favours proliferation, donation or sharing values. Other inhabitants located in the northern districts of Marseilles have created a collective called “Hôtel du Nord.” They promote an alternative model to mass seaside tourism of the city, by encouraging people to share the sensitive experiences of working-class inhabitants of the district and counting on popular hospitality by a system of accommodation with locals.

These initiatives underpin a wind of change. One third of the respondents request more radical changes of our societies against dictated lifestyles, fossilised institutions and economic organisation. Some inhabitants are committed to deconsumption practices. Others say to limit themselves for instance by no longer travelling abroad. A young inhabitant of Nîmes concedes: “I would love to travel around the world, but I prefer to imagine it as beautiful and diverse as it is and give it a chance to recover.”

Conclusion

Ultimately, investigating the climate subjectivation helps to examine how climate change is already experienced in everyday life. By affecting the milieu de vie, our sensitive, ordinary experience is embedded in the world. Contrary to what is often widespread, climate change is far from being a depoliticised issue. The 130 inhabitants we met were deeply concerned about the degradation of the lived world and about the political and metropolitan responsibilities. By examining what ecology meant for them, we noted that most of them distanced themselves from institutional ways of (not) dealing with these issues. Reviving the relation with the milieu de vie would help to arouse other sensitive ways of considering ecology, enough to nourish new understandings of justice³. By taking care of places and people, whatever their living conditions are, it gives rise to the popular essence of what ecology mean. It is based on autonomous commitments, sobriety practises and solidarity relationships. They are a catalyst of empowerment for the inhabitants of these cities⁴.

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3. Cf. Fabian Leveque’s Ph.D. thesis in progress.

4. Cf. Karl Berthelot’s Ph.D. thesis in progress.

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