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► **To cite this version:**

Tommaso Vitale. Introduction. In Cities and Metropolitan Regions, Extreme Inequality Is Not a Destiny. Tommaso Vitale. City Divide. Fighting Urban Inequalities, 65, Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, pp.7-15, 2024, Scenari, 978-88-6835-522-7. hal-04613035

**HAL Id: hal-04613035**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04613035v1>**

Submitted on 17 Jun 2024

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# Introduciton

## **In Cities and Metropolitan Regions, Extreme Inequality Is Not a Destiny**

*Tommaso Vitale*<sup>1</sup>

A complex enigma unfolds in the dazzling lights of modern cities. Cities often seem to be the stage for a dramatic duality: on the one hand, they are the cradles of economic growth, magnets for investment, talent, and job opportunities; on the other hand, they often seem to be places where social inequalities increase, creating a widening gap between the rich and the poor. The reality, however, is much more nuanced.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not inevitable that inequalities will increase in cities. In fact, it is often in these urban centers that bold and redistributive policies are experimented and implemented, aimed at bringing different social groups closer together, sharing common goods and services, and redistributing resources and sometimes even power and agency.

Everything depends on the policies adopted, not only on the strategic choices made but also on the ability to establish inclusive governance on a day-to-day basis. This governance must be flexible enough to adapt to concrete achievements, monitor the timing, and limit the negative effects of the policies themselves, accounting for selective choices on what is governed and what is not governed (Le Galès, Vitale, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> The video interview with Tommaso Vitale is available at the following link: <https://youtu.be/7Tfor7HkEXY>

Tackling inequalities requires enormous difficulty and political courage. Cities face significant challenges, especially when real estate markets are subject to speculation and climate change requires costly interventions to mitigate pollution and adapt to increasingly extreme weather conditions.

An eloquent example is the dramatic drought that hit Europe in 2022, the worst in the last 500 years. This disaster was triggered by rising temperatures caused by the climate crisis, which put unprecedented stress on Europe's water resources. Rivers dried up, and fires destroyed more than 400,000 hectares of meadows and forests. This situation paved the way for a deep and dangerous global food crisis, an issue that involves citizens more than state institutions and for which cities and regions are trying to develop new coordinated public policies.

We know that complex urban conglomerations appear in metropolises around the world. A wicked metropolitan reality has emerged and continues to emerge, especially in Italy, in search of capable institutions with decision-making and effective governance powers to address mobility issues that are still largely related to individual car transport. In the most dynamic metropolises, the population in the commuting areas is growing steadily, but even in cities with a declining population, the commuting areas continue to grow or shrink to a lesser extent than the city center, leading to a wider and more dispersed distribution of the metropolitan population. In these dense urban agglomerations, the dynamic of economic and demographic attractiveness is strong, with traditional activities and disruptive innovations coexisting. Especially in a phase where technological change reshapes the economy, the spatial clustering of disruptive innovations is massive with durable effects in terms of territorial inequalities, spatial output, and income inequality (Kemeny, Petralia, Storper, 2022).

Being attractive may generate a lot of positive externalities, resources to redistribute, and the provision of new amenities, collective goods, and ambitious programs of ecological transition. But also rents, inertia, lateness in coping with negative externalities, and various

types of well-known policy syndromes related to the topping of success and basking on one's laurels (Polizzi, Vitale, 2017). In fact, cities tend to be more polluted than less densely populated regions. Large cities and those with low incomes tend to have particularly high levels of air pollution, such as fine particulate matter (PM 2.5). Not surprisingly, people living in cities are less satisfied with air quality than those in smaller towns or rural areas. This is true even in high-income countries, where pollution levels tend to be lower. Cities are vulnerable to flooding, storms and rising sea levels. One in five urban dwellers is at risk of severe flooding. The urban population in low-lying coastal areas is growing faster than the urban population in other areas. Looking at OECD countries, 14% of the urban population lives in areas vulnerable to storm surges and sea level rise, compared to 10% in medium and small cities and 6% in rural areas (OECD, 2023).

Cities are grappling with the disruptions caused by the global pandemic, but they are also making progress in the green transition to a zero-carbon economy. In this context, low-density and remote regions have made significant strides in clean energy production, generating 40% of the OECD's clean electricity and thus emitting less CO<sub>2</sub>. On the other hand, families living in capital cities often have the lowest energy consumption and have managed to significantly reduce waste production over the past two decades.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in early 2022 disrupted global markets, pushing up food and energy prices and adding to inflationary pressures at a time when the cost of living for families was already rising rapidly. Despite marked differences in inflation rates between countries, inflation in the OECD countries averaged 9.6% in 2022, more than double the rate in 2021 (4.0%) and the highest level since 1988. Despite widespread labor shortages, wage growth in most OECD countries has failed to keep pace with accelerating inflation, eroding families' purchasing power (OECD, 2023).

Rising food and energy prices are driving up the cost of other essential services, such as public transport and childcare.

The cost-of-living crisis could further exacerbate inequalities in cities, as the consequences of higher costs can fall disproportionately on low-income families. While the distributive impact of energy price increases on household budgets varies across countries, when inflation hits low-income families harder than higher-income families, vulnerable families are forced to cut spending on other essential needs, such as food and health.

Not all cities are affected in the same way. In the UK, for example, northern cities and metropolitan areas have been hit harder by the cost-of-living crisis than other parts of the country, due to higher energy consumption resulting from poorer home insulation and greater reliance on cars. In these cities, inflation has been as much as 30% higher than in southern cities.

Municipal governments are also facing rising energy costs that are straining their budgets, such as heating public buildings and facilities, and undermining their ability to provide or ensure essential public services. These higher costs have added to the pressure on budgets already strained by the COVID-19 crisis (Alteri, et al., 2021). As a result, many cities have taken steps to mitigate the impact of rising costs. For example, as part of its energy sobriety plan, the City of Paris has implemented a series of measures to achieve 10% energy savings, including lowering the temperature of all public buildings, lowering the temperature of municipal swimming pools by 1 degree, turning off the lights in all municipal buildings at 10 p.m., and even turning off the lights of the Eiffel Tower at 11:45 p.m. instead of 1 a.m. The City of Paris has also announced a 50% increase in local property taxes in 2023 to ensure the continuity of public services and accelerate the green transition.

The housing affordability crisis in cities is also a major concern. While house prices in many cities have fallen somewhat recently, they have still been rising steadily for several decades, outpacing income growth in most OECD countries. The most recent OECD report, from which the data I discuss here are drawn, is very clear and reliable (OECD, 2023). Real house prices increased by 77% between 1996 and

2022, compared with GDP per capita growth of 29%. This rapid growth in house prices may have created wealth effects for homeowners, but it has made homeownership increasingly unattainable for many families, especially considering that rising rents have made it more difficult for tenants to save for deposits. Moreover, rising rents have made them more vulnerable to shocks, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cafora, Larena, Vitale, 2024).

In addition to this long-term trend, housing-related expenses (including utilities, rent, maintenance, and repairs) in OECD countries increased by 20% per year in 2022, mainly due to rising energy prices. These housing-related costs, such as maintenance and utilities, increased at a time when 15% of households in the lowest income quintile in OECD countries (for which data are available) were already unable to afford adequate heating for their homes. These costs will remain high even if inflation falls in 2023, and are expected to fall further in 2024.

Long-term efforts to expand housing supply have been hampered by rising construction costs and higher financing costs for developers. Low- and middle-income families are bearing the brunt of these overlapping crises. Even before the current cost of living crisis, more than one-third of low-income renters in OECD countries spent 40% of their disposable income on rent alone. Due to the increased cost of living and higher interest rates, low- and middle-income families are facing growing difficulties in paying rent or mortgages, threatening their housing security. In many cities, this has led to an increase in evictions, especially as temporary eviction suspension measures and other emergency housing supports introduced during the COVID-19 crisis are gradually disappearing in many OECD countries.

In the case of the United States, low-income families have been pushed out of central cities, moving instead to peripheral suburbs at a higher rate than wealthier families (Rodríguez-Pose, Storper, 2020). Low-income families are also more likely to live in substandard or overcrowded housing and less likely to be able to afford regular maintenance or improvements to their homes, while facing barriers to moving to better housing.

In addition to the direct impact of higher housing costs on household budgets, the cost of living crisis and the high interest rate environment have further limited access to homeownership for low- and middle-income families, as it has become increasingly difficult to save for housing deposits or because the monthly payments on adjustable rate mortgages, which make up the majority of existing and new mortgages in several OECD countries, have become too costly.

Access to decent and affordable housing has become more difficult in recent years, especially for young adults. Today's young people, especially those on low incomes, often face greater difficulties than previous generations in accessing quality and affordable housing, and in many countries are increasingly struggling to become homeowners, limiting their ability to accumulate wealth (Vitale, Cafora, 2024).

Within countries, cities have become the epicenter of this crisis, with house prices and rents often rising faster than the national average. On average in 2020 and 2021, only 40% of urban residents in the OECD reported being satisfied with the availability of good quality, affordable housing in their area, compared with around 50% of rural residents.

In 2021, in 17 OECD countries with available data, buying a home in a metropolitan area was 40% more expensive than in a region far from a metropolitan area, and within metropolitan areas, city centers were on average 30% more expensive than suburbs. Low-income families have been hardest hit, but so-called "squeezed middle-class" families, whose incomes have not kept pace with rising housing costs, have often had to move to less expensive areas, away from job opportunities and access to basic services.

Several structural factors explain the increasing demand for housing in cities. These include urbanization and the tendency for populations (including refugees and migrants) to concentrate in urban centers in search of better opportunities and lifestyles. Declining marriage rates and rising divorce rates are creating additional demand for smaller housing units. Increased tourism and the proliferation of short-term

rentals through platforms such as Airbnb are also playing a role in some cities.

An increase in speculative investment in the real estate sector, coupled with low interest rates until 2022, has contributed to rising house prices in some locations, particularly in prime city locations. According to a recent study (Holm, et al., 2023), the rate at which institutional investors, such as private equity funds and pension funds, are acquiring residential real estate in major European cities has actually accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic. European capitals have been the main location for these investments, with Berlin leading the way with over €40 billion of residential assets in institutional portfolios, followed by London, Amsterdam, Paris, and Vienna. While large cities tend to attract the majority of residential investment, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have seen large institutional transactions in smaller cities. Overall, the financialization of housing risks making many housing units unavailable for rent and as places to live, exacerbating housing shortages.

In front of the crisis, we have assisted to a decade and more of fatalism. As if there was no more capacity to reduce inequalities, and urban planning and intentional spatial development were old and useless blunt weapons. But why such a fatalism? Systematic global comparative urban research tells us a completely different story, where there is simply no room for fatalism and a feelings of feelings of helplessness. Deep transformation in response to the climate crisis can be an opportunity to create new goods, services, and jobs, reduce inequalities, and fight poverty. However, this challenge requires careful analysis of the policy instruments used, a realistic view of the data, and an unwavering commitment to a more sustainable and inclusive future for all. These data underscore the urgency of addressing the cost-of-living crisis in cities, as well as a deep proficiency in spatially informed ‘strategic judgement’ (Albrechts 2004, Healey 2009). Social polarization and economic inequality are not inevitable. Cities can reduce poverty, they can fight poverty, but these problems need to be addressed seriously. Urban and regional plans are not enough, and they are re-



quired to be governed and implemented daily in endless contention. However, they are relevant instruments, made with clear rules, precise assumptions about cause and effect, and an analysis of the existing complexities, and they propose a visual representation of scenarios and their implications on regulatory procedures and investment budget-setting (Cremaschi, 2023). Obviously, reducing regional, urban, and social inequalities does not require just formal plans and political willingness, but a good governance capacity: so to say, durable coalitions and strategic policy-making to generate synergies, conflicts, connectivities, plans of metropolitan spatial organisation, and effective outcomes in unique patternings (Cremaschi, Le Galès, 2018). To promote stable coalitions, and durable policy efforts to reduce inequalities, such patternings must be recognised, ‘summoned up’ into attention (Healey, 2013), and become a symbolic setting for generating the mobilising force to continue implementing key interventions.

Because to redress inequalities, the point is not only what to do, or how to redistribute towards the less wealthy, but to decide where investing, where to locate infrastructure and job opportunities, which places require inclusive accessibility and improved mobility, what public spaces are disempowering people and ambushing their health and opportunities, which neighbourhood point for mobilising institutional investors in sustainable affordable housing as ‘carriers’ of the strategic redistributive intention, stabilising expectations of social mix (Vitale, 2007). Even regarding at environmental justice, control congestion and pollution, set up a reliable circular economy to reduce energy poverty and improve waste management public benefits, it always require unearthing and mobilising potential resourceful but still sceptical actors/agencies, locally-based economic interests and areas of existing capacity.

The main problem, also in progressive cities, is a political one, with attention and interest towards inequalities going up and down, and progressive coalitions remaining weak and too discontinuous in building a focus. Reducing inequalities requires a strategy, a large variety of policy instruments, budget implications and regulatory adjustmen-

ts, but even more the capacity to last and endure. A plea for flexible and adaptive institutional arrangements and plans can not become an intellectual reactionary excuse for punctuated (and ineffective) implementation (Vitale, 2009).

So, this is for governing with the scope of reducing inequalities and fostering the ecological transition. Urban, metropolitan and regional governance are prone to classical multilevel competition and contention among key agencies (Iammarino, Rodriguez-Pose, Storper, 2019). However, political competition may be based on accelerating the fight against inequality and seeking out coordination efficiencies and synergies for political reward. We are in a new 'age' of political behavior, where the reduction of territorial and personal inequalities is much more appreciated by the electoral body (Rodríguez-Pose, et al., 2024). Plans and policies are evaluated on the basis of clear achievements, collective goods creation and redistribution in the urban conglomerates, and a recognisable articulation of good balance between technical science and 'street science' based on citizens' experience and voice.

A prosperous city is one where its inhabitants, regardless of their social position, can benefit from its opportunities. The challenge of reducing inequalities and creating inclusive cities is not impossible, but it requires bold policies, and political culture is crucial. Cities that succeed in reducing inequalities and social polarization are governed with a spirit of social dialogue, using collegial governance to confront and mediate conflicts, and developing a strong capacity for compromise that challenges the power of the most entrenched interests. They are local governments that conceive the city as a place of continuous learning, where one of the key resources is the co-production of public knowledge, and where criticism and participation are essential democratic levers for governing change.

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