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*The city, unsustainable development
and the limits of social innovation.*

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The presentation discusses the limits and contradictions of the perspective of “Smart City” – a city open and centred on social innovation experiences from below – as a possible solution to the tensions of contemporary urban transformations.

Three main areas of discussion will be involved.

1. The question of the unsustainability of contemporary capitalist development and of the process of commodification.
2. The perspectives opened by social innovation experiences in terms of sharing economy, the pursuit of Commons and the promotion of forms of decommodification and community resilience.
3. The question of the local / city as an autonomous level of economic and political organization.

The debate on the present transformation of cities

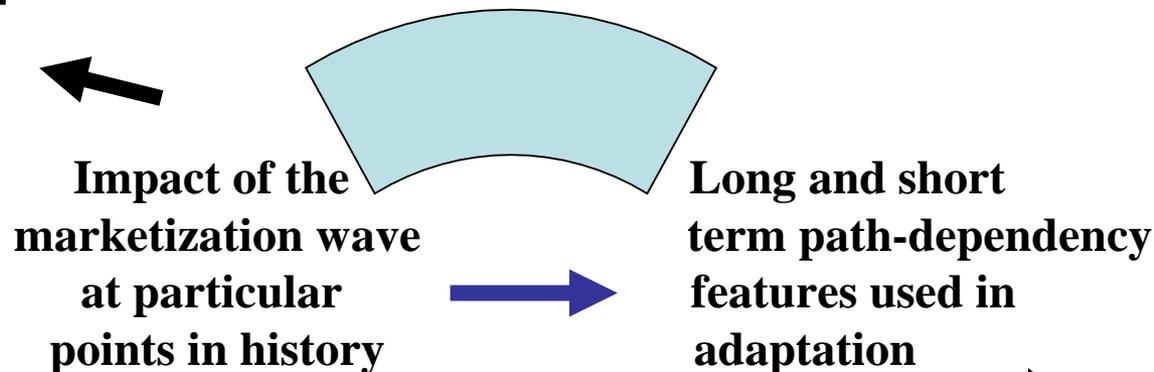
- The pessimistic views based on the unsustainability of commodification, the impact of neoliberal policies and austerity, the economic crisis, increasing inequalities and poverty : the unjust city the expulsion city.
- The question of agency and of the importance of resilience and mobilization: the line of the **right to the city** from Lefebvre to Harvey.
- The romantic optimistic alternatives of the smart cities (and the neocommunitarian non urban variant of happy degrowth).

Let us begin by discussing the question of sustainability using a pragmatic approach inspired to Polanyi's double movement.

Methodological frame of analysis based on capitalism as a commodification force: the process of destruction and reconstruction of social bonds and social relations.

Mobilization of emancipation movements

Non instantaneous



Great regime transformations

versus

Continuous more or less important adaptations

Social institutions transformations and persistence

The 3 areas of institution building:
Reciprocity
Redistribution
Market cooperation



Important warnings for the understanding of contemporary social questions

1. **Take into account the dynamic aspects of societies.**
2. **Take into account the global frame: the diversity between the North and the South and the dynamic interconnections between the two.**
3. Market diffusion is an emancipation process (from traditional forms of domination: kinship, community, clan, tribe, religious groups) but opens new tensions (deficit of social protection). And not in all cases (see the following point).
4. Commodification without emancipation has been typical of capitalist colonization and post-colonization. The traditional oppressive institutions have been used by colonizers and by global capitalism to maintain control.
5. The institutional redistributive responses to modernization are featured by tensions due to bureaucratization, political domination, waste of resources, discrimination and exclusion processes.
6. The commodification/ individualization process has produced at the same time welfare cities and slum cities but now the situation is largely different.



The contemporary profile of urban social change in the age of global financial capitalism

The progressive weakening and exhaustion of emancipation potentials creates tensions but commodification has still some emancipation potentials which are very controversial (think at the acceptance of diversity).

The interconnection between financialization and bureaucratic/ political oppression is enforcing economic and social inequalities, corruption opportunities and giving rise to conflicts, resilience and opposition.

The present is an uncertain period dominated by commodification with little emancipation, difficulties of social representation of fragmented urban populations and other contrasting dynamics (social movements, innovation experiences, new forms of solidarity and community, commons, etc.).

The importance of the nation states is declining but paradoxically the crisis favors austerity control on local spending (upscaling).

The trends of change towards fragmented individualized societies

1. Individualization
2. Destandardization
3. Fragmentation of the welfare risks.

Increase in the social and territorial inequalities. Deficit in the social citizenship rights. Discriminations against weak or less mobilized groups.

1. Innovations of welfare in order to produce more articulated and more efficient protections: local, active, social investments. Empowering initiatives and solidarity forms of decommodification.
2. Decline of public responsibility. Austerity, cuts in the public expenses and services, privatization, competition, managerialism.

**Tensions
between
protection
rights and
cuts/
austerity**



The controversial impact of urban social innovation experiences

The question of the commons: in search of new forms of solidarity and community that are inclusive and not oppressive.

Innovations producing forms of decommodification with what impact on societies?

Innovative and alternative forms of commodification (Uber, Airbnb, Makers, Sharing economies): local fragmentation and social conflicts.

Real sharing and open forms of solidarity are limited and controversial in cities that are becoming increasingly multicultural (migrants and refugees are here).

The question of collective agency: fragmented interests difficult to recombine and represent, not in my backyard and populist defense of «our cities» against newcomers.

Internet and informational technologies may help to put people in touch but cannot create stable organizations and political elites.



Towards a long period of uncertain, chaotic, controversial decay of capitalism

Streeck 2014 “How Will Capitalism End?” NLR 87:

“The demise of capitalism ... is unlikely to follow anyone’s blueprint. As the decay progresses, it is bound to provoke political protests and manifold attempts at collective intervention. But for a long time, these are likely to remain of the Luddite sort: local, dispersed, uncoordinated, ‘primitive’—adding to the disorder while unable to create a new order, at best unintentionally helping it to come about.”



The economic crisis and the debate on the end of capitalism / end of the double movement

- 1) Commodification without emancipation (or even better against emancipation) is problematic if it is not accompanied by a very high degree of violence and oppression (colonialism, slavery, imperialism).
- 2) The re-embeddedness process are becoming extremely problematic in terms of producing protection and defending public interests as contrasted by austerity policies, bureaucratic, political and financial appropriation of resources.
- 3) The countertendencies of decommodification are weakening the double movement in its very disembedding capacities.
- 4) The emancipation and democratization movements are becoming less and less compatible with the commodification part of the double movement.