Towards a Nomadic Geography: Rethinking Space and Identity for the Potentials of Progressive Politics in the Contemporary City

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Introduction

How to read the contemporary city? In the highly charged distinction that marks the city in opposition to the countryside, the rural is generally identified with the virtues and evils of community, whereas the urban denotes the presence of something called a ‘public sphere’. During the course of modern history, urban places and spaces have served as arenas of this public sphere and were as such considered privileged sites for political negotiations. The concept of the public sphere has thus served as an important — and specific — way of reading the city, in terms of a public geography.

Facing the current ambiguities of the contemporary city — where mobile urban lifestyles are dispersed over a globalizing landscape and localisms reappear in the core of the city, where migration flows and their hybridization of ethnicities contradict those entities of exclusion whose gates are to keep ‘others’ out, and where a cosmopolitan multiculturalism momentarily lights up in an atmosphere of xenophobia — does the concept of the public sphere still offer a solid geography for understanding this urban landscape? Has the public sphere lost its potential for political engagement since it has been announced that we have reached ‘the end of public space’ (Sorkin, 1992), so ‘we can leave the theatre now’ (Koolhaas, 1995: 1264)? And if the public sphere, traditionally bound to city or nation as levels for political and social negotiation, starts to show signs of dissolution into a global and a local sphere, what are the potentials of these alternative spheres to reinvigorate a politics of public participation, that quality once considered to be the essence of a healthy public sphere? Can the idea of community or a conception of ‘the global’ serve as a starting point for an alternative geography that situates spaces for progressive politics? In the search for new visions to imagine progressive urban change today, the complexity in relations between space and identity in the contemporary city needs to be explored.

The problematic of a public geography in the contemporary city

The public sphere: abstract space and rational identity

Evaluating the usefulness of the concept of the public sphere as a tool to understand the city today implies tracing the workings of this age-old concept — with its claims and distortions, and the mythologies that have grown around it — throughout history. During
the course of early capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie, the public sphere has appeared as a specific domain — the public domain as located in between the private domain and the state. The emerging class of bourgeois capitalists in the eighteenth century can be seen as the carrier of this public sphere, a sphere of private people coming together as a public, claiming the public sphere from the public authorities. The essential feature of this emerging public sphere was that it made possible, for the first time, rational political debate between private people — both as economic actors, and as members of the intimate private sphere of the family. Finding its place in the emerging institutions of the coffee houses, salons and Tischgesellschaften, this debate was one in which everyone in principle had to be able to participate (Habermas, 1989: 37). As such, the city could be understood as projecting a stable public geography — responsible for a particular regime of identity in space.

Although this early concept of the public sphere continues to influence present-day political theory, the problematic of its rigid regime of identity in space can be uncovered by assessing its main characteristics, abstract universality and political rationality (Gould, 1996: 172). During the eighteenth century, universal access in the liberal public sphere was indeed a myth; it was the simple extension of the early capitalist market into the social and political realm, the identification of ‘property owner’ with ‘human being as such’ (Habermas, 1989: 88). The lower classes — although not principally excluded from the public sphere — were forced into the background of public life since education, a precondition for participation in the rational public debate, maintained the social hierarchy. Since access to the liberal public sphere was not universal from the outset, but something acquired through contestation and struggle, its principle of freedom of interest can be uncovered as a second myth. The public sphere, instead of being envisioned as uncontested abstract space, can therefore be dismantled as an ideological construct, along with the bourgeois constitutional state of which it is the central principle of organization.

When the public sphere cannot be regarded as being free of ideology, its nature as a constituent of democratic politics of public participation, implies the negotiation of different ideologies: as such the concept of the public sphere shifts from unity towards a struggle of differences in public. With its forceful aim to reach consensus, the liberal public sphere regarded difference as something to be gotten past in the process of rational debate, thereby repressing difference for the sake of the unity. Furthermore, its underlying ideology ‘removes from the public sphere not only difference, but also the creativity that issues forth in imaginative critique and rejection of existing agreement and in the generation of new and unexpected frameworks for agreement’ (Gould, 1996: 173).

Ultimately, the concept of the liberal public sphere — strongly defended by Habermas — does not incorporate difference other than of rational political opinion. As such, it regards human beings as narrowly constructed identities: individuals whose behavior is irrelevant within the intimate sphere of the family, but who are fully rational in debate. In the concept of the rational public sphere, all other human activities and emotions are seen as apolitical and are moved towards the private realm. Thus, by shifting aside all ‘irrational’ sentiments and passions — memory, history, family, community, racism, and the traces of colonialism — from the realm of discussion, the understanding of the workings of these sentiments is obscured. However, the re-emergence of fundamentalisms in the heart of the liberal democracy (e.g. in Austria, Germany and Belgium), whether seen as a return of the archaic (Lyotard, 1991: 203–15), or understood as the nature of the political, as defined by Mouffe (1994: 106), proves that such sentiments cannot simply be domesticated by removing them from the public stage. In its inability to acknowledge processes of identity formation that clearly move beyond

1 As described in the work of Habermas and Sennett (see Sennett, 1989: 23).
the level of rational politics, liberal political thought powerlessly witnesses the reappearance — in terrible forms — of those irrational sentiments.

In its blinding myth of abstract space and rational identity, the concept of the liberal public sphere ultimately fails to understand the complexities of space and identity formation in the contemporary city. As such, it projects a fixed geography that falls short in perceiving how ideologies determine the spaces of public discussion and negotiation, and how identity is formed beyond rationality. In order to overcome these problems with a conceptual framework of the public sphere, it is important to have a closer look at notions of space and identity in the city. Therefore we will look first at the ways in which identity is actually performed in urban space and, secondly, at the ways in which certain sentiments, conceptually pushed to the private sphere, are in fact played out in the formation of collective identities in relation to space.

**Performance in public: people as convincing actors?**

In the liberal concept of the public sphere with its focus on rational verbal communication, differences between the actual participants in the public discussion — differences such as in class, gender and race — are in principle irrelevant to the actual public communication. In urban reality however, the way people interact in space is characterized by the primacy of the visual over speech. Consequently, difference becomes a fundamental aspect of the ways in which people interact and express identities in urban space.

‘The great city is a theatre. Its scenario is principally the search for reputations. All city men become artists of a particular kind: actors’ (Sennett, 2002: 119). This notion has been conceptualized in the idea of the public sphere as a *theatrum mundi*, offering a theory for the routine staging of differences in the act of self-dramatization (see, for instance, Sennett, 2000: 386 and 2002: 34). The routine implies a vocabulary of public roles that can be playacted, and as such, ensure a state of equilibrium in public interaction. People in the ‘city as stage’ have the ability to play with and invest feeling in external images of self. How does this concept of the ‘public act’ conceptualize the relations between space and identity in the city? According to Sennett the concept of urban space as *theatrum mundi* is based upon four characteristics: an audience, continuity in rules of belief, expression and a public geography (Sennett, 2002: 39).

The notion of a stable public geography not only implies the unproblematic mapping of public spaces to fixed locations, it also tends to envisage public space merely as a passive and abstract stage on which dramatization takes place. This vision does not take into account the fact that space actively remembers. Indeed, what about the traces that human actions leave in urban spaces, even apart from buildings and other physical constructions, waste, etc? Regarding the contemporary geographies of graffiti for example, graphic expression can be considered as the trace of an ‘act’ that is itself invisible. Although these traces cannot be framed within Sennett’s concept of the ‘city as stage’, the practices of graffiti can be seen as forms of expression that are directed towards an audience. Unwritten rules within the ephemeral communities of graffiti ‘artists’ prove that these expressions signify the existence of ‘alternative’ public spheres, thereby denying the concept of a stable public geography for the affirmation of overlapping traces of identity in urban space. Space thus bears active witness to human action.

Another problematic aspect of the ‘city as stage’ is connected to performativity and ‘acting in public’ itself. As feminist thinker Julia Kristeva has pointed out, ‘any utterance, for example, not only has a literal meaning, but is laden with ambiguities, embodied in gesture, tone of voice, and rhythm that all contribute to the heterogeneity of its meaning without being intended’ (cited in Young, 2000: 433). When these meanings are not coherent and likely not to be controllable by the ‘actor in public’, the performative quality of the public sphere can be questioned. When subjects not
only fail to make themselves fully transparent, but also fail to render their act coherent, the notions of expression and audience in the ‘public act’ become indeed problematic.

Thus the concept of the ‘city as stage’ brings to the fore how identities are being performed in urban spaces, but fails to address the problems with the memory of urban space, as well as the communication problems in the performance of identities. Can identity be successfully staged in urban spaces? The ways in which relations are created between identity and space in the formation of collective identities, relations that go far beyond the ephemeral staging in the ‘city as theatre’, can offer an answer to this question.

Collective identities and the goal of exclusive space

As a second way of moving beyond the rigidities within the concept of the public sphere, we want to recognize the ‘irrationality’ of xenophobia and racism by theorizing the ways in which collective identities are being formed in relation to space. According to Iris Marion Young, the construction of an identity works by eliminating difference, by turning difference into the ‘abject’ (Kristeva, 1982), into ‘the enemy’ (Bauman: 1991): ‘Any move to define an identity, a closed totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure’ (Young, 2000: 430).

The process, by which urban space is employed in order to construct a collective identity, can be illustrated by Sennett’s analysis of the Jewish ghetto in Venice. ‘Community and repression: Venetian Christians sought to create a Christian community by segregating those who were different, drawing on the fear of touching alien, seductive bodies. Jewish identity became entangled in that same geography of repression’ (Sennett, 1994: 217). Sennett, firmly rejecting the politics of community in the city as he sees merely destructive forces in community action, perceives the workings of collective identities as means of domination through space: communities exclude, discriminate and segregate.

The search for a univocal identification of collectivity and space is embodied in the American trend of New Urbanism, a movement that attempts to revalue ‘a sense of community’ in urban living: ‘The apparent drive of the New Urbanism is to forge a vapid unity of self and place, unconstrained by history, seemingly unconstrained by what was once called “the human” ’ (MacCannell, 1999: 115). Andrew Ross, a close observer of a New Urbanism community in the US, points to the problems that arise in this process of community building: “The sense of community that was most authentic and resourceful emerged in response to perceived threats, challenges and barriers to people’s well-being, and above all, to their property values” (Ross, 1999: 318). For the inhabitants of the New Urbanism village, who seem to be confident about being consumers rather than citizens in a place where a commercial corporation has replaced the state, the communal enemy seems to be a decrease of the individual’s property value. After all, the dynamics Ross (1999) describes inside the New Urbanism village illustrate how the creation of a community is not unproblematic, as the division of the community into the real ones and the fake ones, the ‘Positives’ and the ‘Negatives’ (MacCannell, 1999: 112) shows. The creation of a perfect ‘unity of self and place’, of identity and space, is in fact an impossibility.

Indeed, the goal of a community in trying to create a totality in which the world is a home, is doomed to failure because it ‘creates not one, but two: an inside and outside’ (Young, 2000: 431). Furthermore, the exclusion of otherness in general is complicated in that it fails to keep the excluded out: the politics of transgression demonstrate how the inside always includes the outside in a symbolic way ‘as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level’ (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 5). This reveals a constitutive ambivalence in the
nature of any political construction of collective identity. Space and identity cannot be fused unproblematically.

Moving beyond the binaries in reading the contemporary city

So far we have analysed the concepts of the public sphere and of community politics as offering a specific way of reading the city, one that features specific relations between space and identity. ‘The warfare between psyche and society has acquired a real geographical focus, one replacing the older, behavioural balance between public and private. This new geography is communal versus urban; the territory of warm feeling versus the territory of impersonal blankness’ (Sennett, 2002: 301 — emphasis added).

Following Sennett, the contemporary city can be read as being faced with a duality between a communitarian and a cosmopolitan development, between opening up and closing itself to difference. Is it possible to move beyond this binary reading of the city, towards an alternative and more complex understanding of contemporary urban space and identity formation?

The liberal public sphere, whether seen as a realm of speech (Jürgen Habermas) or of performativity (Erving Goffman, Richard Sennett), and the politics of community (right and left wing) offer valuable insight into the relations between identity and space in the contemporary city, but do not suffice as tools to envision the spatial complexities in identity formation of the city today. We want to investigate if the ideas of the public sphere and of community action can be rescued by a more dynamic and less dualistic understanding of space and identity as possibilities for imagining and theorizing progressive urban change today.

The dual city is an ancient device, as old as the Western idea of the city itself (Cohen, 2000: 318). Readings of the city as in a duality between inside and outside, material and spiritual, rich and poor, visible and invisible, bourgeois and proletarian, indigenous and immigrant, night and day run through the history of city narratives. As such, the diverse spatialities of identity face the danger of becoming rigidly dichotomized.

According to Cohen, the duality of the city can be related to body and text:

Bodies have invisible insides and visible outsides, text legible surfaces and depths of meanings hidden ‘between the lines’. Through their conjugation we arrive at the notions of a hidden urban underworld as an ultimate repository of inside stories and a socially transparent overworld where everything is on the surface, legible and light. It was through this moral economy that fluid hierarchies of wealth, status, skill, labour, and lifestyle were hardened into bitter binaries of rich and poor, native and immigrant, established and outsider (2000: 321).

The problem with dualist readings of the city is that they tend to run parallel with a kind of political theory that privileges binaries, and thus constructs boundaries between inside and outside. On the one side, there is the safe haven of transparency, community and morality; on the other side the alternative world of strangers, uncertainty and danger.

The dual city in the Victorian era,2 where class antagonism offered a coherent structure for a binary reading of the city — the visible and the invisible city as features of high life and low life — seems to have changed radically in form. And although there are signs of a new dualism ‘between a progressive ethnoscape associated with the postcolonial city, celebrating a healthy, happy hybridity, and a reactionary landscape of “old ethnicities” mired in pathological purities or religious fundamentalisms belonging to the bad old colonial days’ (Cohen, 2000: 325), the global city with its spaces of flows, its new ethnicities and urban lifestyles seems to deny this duality, giving birth to the image of a complex geography where inside and outside are disrupted and recombined into multiplicities.

2 As described by Friedrich Engels (see Marcus, 1974).
Indeed, subordinate and dominant culture can no longer be reduced to a simple opposition. Therefore it is crucial ‘to replace the notion of “culture” with the more concrete, historical concept of “cultures”’ (Clarke et al., 1976: 12). An example of such an identity struggle that transcends the dual city is youth culture. Youth culture is not a universal culture, it is structured by class distinction, but also by its parent culture, which it expresses autonomy towards but also needs to maintain identification with (ibid.: 52). Subcultural identities within youth culture arise at the intersection between the local parent culture and the institutions of dominant cultures of work, education, leisure, etc. Their relation to class is thus not simply settled, and likewise their resistance or identity struggle is not simply caught in a binary opposition. Age, class, race and gender can be envisaged as acting as multiple axes of domination and resistance in the city of today.

As such, we can start to conceptualize a multiplicity of spatialities related to a multiplicity of dominations and resistances in the contemporary city: ‘The key step is to recognize and occupy new and alternative geographies — a “thir spaceship” of political choice — different but not detached entirely from the geographies defined by the original binary oppositions’ (Soja and Hopper, 1993: 198). In their denial of the dual city, resistances therefore cross the spaces marked by inside and outside by developing other focuses and desires that are distinct from the systems of domination. ‘From this perspective, resistance is less about particular acts, than about the desire to find a place in a power-geography where space is denied, circumscribed and/or totally administered. The implication is that resistance comes from a place outside of the practices of domination’ (Pile, 1997: 15). When space and identity can be reconfigured in this sense, it is possible to move beyond a dualist geography for reading the city. The concept of a public geography in binary opposition can then replaced by multiple and dynamic geographies.

Space and identity: multiplying the stranger

Rethinking space

Space can be reconceptualized as being fundamentally constituted by past and present ideologies, something which the concept of a public geography obscures: space is always something that is actively produced and reproduced to sustain or alter socio-economic and cultural differences. This notion corresponds to Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial turn from ‘things in space’ to ‘the production of space’, a theoretical shift that dismantles the myth of Cartesian space regarding the social world of the city. Consequently, contemporary disorganized capitalism not only gives birth to a differential space as opposed to the homogeneous space of organized capitalism, but furthermore results in a fundamental multiplicity of spatialities where old and new ideologies, homogeneous and differential space, coexist (Keith and Pile, 1993: 24). As such spatiality in the city is profoundly impure and hybrid.

Space can thus be envisaged as a palimpsest of historical layers, some of which have disappeared while others remain active in constituting identities. In contrast to univocal representations of space as described by theorists from Marc Augé to Sharon Zukin, none of these singular layers can be presented as the only one representing the urban landscape. Similarly, the relativistic notion that all of the layers are of equal importance, is flawed. There are traces of history that disappear while others continue to influence the present. ‘For this metropolis is not simply the final stage of a poignant narrative, of apocalypse and nostalgia, it is also the site of the ruins of previous orders in which diverse histories, languages, memories and traces continually entwine and recombine in the construction of new horizons’ (Chambers, 1990: 112). The multiplicity of spatialities in the contemporary city allows a kaleidoscopic urban knowledge to be developed,

where Benjamin’s multiple readings of the city in space and time can serve as a source of inspiration. In such readings of the city, experience, knowledge and spatiality collide, thereby evoking the realization that urban space equals difference, not merely coexisting differences and different perspectives, but contesting differences and unequal power relations.

As a result of increasing movement in the age of disorganized capitalism, urban space is increasingly traversed by flows of objects and people. The contemporary cultures of migration do not stand still, just as the spaces traversed and temporarily inhabited also change with their successive waves of populations. In this sense, urban space can be seen to be in a continual process of transformation. Spatiality then becomes a process, and movement through space an urban condition. The contemporary city can thus give birth to ‘a liquid space in which the full fragments of the space of staying float in the void of going’ (Careri, 2002: 42 — emphasis in original). Urban space is liquid in its successive waves of influences, hidden narratives, its populations of people, spaces, objects, feelings and virtualities. We can refer here to the ‘magma’ as a metaphor for the geopolitical: ‘those underlying, unstable, fluid “substances” that may break the ordered surface and provoke re-orderings, re-structurings or, in certain moments, transformative ruptures’ (Slater, 1997: 267). As such, the presence of the ‘non-indigenous’ gives rise to a cultural condition in which the stranger and the strange are always behind the corner of cosy worlds.

Rethinking identity

Identity can similarly be reconceptualized to move beyond the confines of coherence as imposed by the concepts of the public sphere. Difference is not merely the constituent of identity, ‘it is also that which resists or exceeds the closure of identity. It signals not a difference from others but a difference that troubles identity from within its would-be economy of the same’ (Honig, 1996: 257 — emphasis in original). The idea of identity as a unity is a fiction, since subjectivities are always in a process of becoming. As such, their representations rely on merely arbitrary closures of this process (Keith and Pile, 1993: 28). Indeed, when identity is defined by and fundamentally depends on ‘otherness’, it should not be seen as a stable thing, but rather as a process in continual transformation.4 The ‘constitutive outside’ within the process of identity formation ensures that ‘identity cannot, therefore, belong to one person alone, and no one belongs to a single identity’ (Mouffe, 1994: 110). This implies that all identities are simultaneously singular and collective entities in a state of becoming.

Collective identities cannot therefore simply be rejected within the urban context. Although Sennett argues that communities segregate and repress, it should be questioned if communities, based on the sharing of certain identities or background, can simply be rejected as a vehicle for progressive urban change. ‘Love of the ghetto, especially the middle-class ghetto, denies the person a chance to enrich his perceptions, his experience, and learn that the most valuable of all human lessons, the ability to call the established conditions of his life into question’ (Sennett, 2002: 294). This Enlightenment ethic of individualism as detachment from previous affiliation, so cherished by thinkers like Richard Sennett, becomes as problematic as the reviled ethic of a closed community. Might shared grounds of identity not be an essential basis for active participation? The concept of a detached public sphere seems to be in itself obstructing the active political participation that a healthy public sphere is based upon: ‘in the one case, localism can generate xenophobic violence; in the other, the elimination of local community as the ground of citizenship tends to preclude active participation in the business of rule’ (Appadurai and Holston, 1999: 191). Appadurai and Holsten successfully dislocate the argument for privileging detachment as foundation for the public sphere:

4 See the work of Kristeva, as cited in Young (2000).
without prior formative attachment and commitments to family, culture, ethnicity, religion, and the like, people cannot achieve the very sense of moral depth and personhood that the liberal compact requires. However, it is precisely these kinds of prior affiliation that liberal citizenship refuses... Thus it produces citizens who are predominantly passive in their citizenship (ibid.: 193).

The element of affiliation thus seems to be a necessary ingredient for active public participation. Is urban politics a matter of steering between the Scylla of exclusion and the Charybdis of a passive public sphere? Identity is constructed by the transformation of things that are different into hostile oppositions: this is the creation of an ‘us’ by the demarcation of a ‘them’ (Mouffe’s interpretation of Derrida’s ‘constitutive outside’). Mouffe calls this process of exclusion in identity formation ‘the political’. A successful political process for her ‘consists of “domesticating hostility” and of trying to defuse the potential antagonism inherent in human relations’ (Mouffe, 1994: 108), thus complementing the liberal strategy with a deep understanding and acknowledgement of the political and a strategy of ‘how to arrive at a consensus without exclusion’ (ibid.: 108).

Rather than going back to the urge for a deadening consensus, however, a more fertile way of looking at identity might start with the replacement of the word ‘community’ by the word ‘collectivity’. Collectivities can be seen as unstable entities in a state of continual change and reconfiguration. While communities are necessarily confronted with duality and fracture, collectivities are characterized by hybridity and transformation. Identities as such are not univocal butcentred, as there is a ‘fragmenting of linearity through the repetition and displacement of psychic materials’ (Chambers, 1990: 105). Subjects are multiplicities; everyone represents more than one fixed identity; class gender and race disrupt and recombine. New ethnicities, whose ‘roots become routes’ (ibid.: 105) emerge while others transform and hybridize. As such, identity can be re-temporalized and re-spatialized.

**Multiplying the stranger**

The reconceptualization of space and identity implies that conflict and resistance are inescapable features in urban politics. It implies we have to ‘give up on the dream of a place called home, a place free of power, conflict, and struggle’ (Honig, 1996: 258). Just as one can feel the uncanny always hidden in the bourgeois interior, so does difference within identity show us the stubborn presence of the strangers in all of us. According to Bonnie Honig, the construction of a home isolated from conflict and withdrawn from the noise of politics is an impossible desire that should be given up. But to abolish the idea of home threatens to abolish personal memory, backgrounds, ethnicity, etc. Home can therefore not be simply removed from the table, in a similar way as rational liberalism abolishes emotions, past affiliations, etc. Home can also be considered as a temporary state of being, serving as an invaluable site for the preservation of a multiplicity of histories, for preparation, withdrawal and resistance.

After having moved towards a reconceptualization of space and identity in the contemporary city, we might be able to understand Sennett’s description of the public sphere in the ancien régime in another light: as something in continual formation, already in downfall before being fully established. In fact, the public sphere then becomes a process rather than a form, a process fuelled by the encounters of uncertain quantities beyond the individual subject and the community. As such the public sphere can be understood — without falling into the traps of ecological determinism — as a play of uncertain identities in contested spaces.

Consequently, Sennett’s dualism between the communitarian and the cosmopolitan can be shifted towards a tension between the familiar and the strange (see Keith, 2003). According to Sennett (2002: 48), a city is ‘a milieu in which strangers are likely to meet’. Spatial estrangement and the stranger can be understood as important constituents...
of the city, but not simply as particular detached individuals, groups or spaces. *The strange is diffused in the interstices of space and identity.* ‘The strangers are not, however, the “as-yet-undecided”’; they are, in principle, undecidables. They are that “third element” which should not be. The true hybrids, the monsters: not just unclassified, but unclassifiable’ (Bauman, 1990: 148). ‘Their number and nuisance power seem to grow with the intensity of dichotomizing efforts’ (*ibid.*: 155). As such, the stranger can be seen as an alternative for the dual city, and a solution for the problematic of the public sphere.

**Towards a nomadic geography: changing collectivities, multiple spatialities**

Urban identities are thus in the always unfinished process of a multiplicity of interactions in a space that is contaminated by others and whose outlines are blurred. Identity formation takes place in spaces that are occupied by difference, and that are full of traces of past identities and memories, allowing us to read the city in terms of the presence of uncertain, uncontrolled identities in contested spaces that are in the process of transformation.

Understanding space and identity in terms of their continual change, may lead to the concept of a *nomadic geography*. ‘Nomadic’ here refers to the figure of the nomad as evoked in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. Nomadism does not take place in abstract empty spaces, but in spaces that are situated in an ambivalent position between strangeness and familiarity. The nomad is not an explorer of ever-new terrain. Rather, his or her cyclical movements turn into a *ritornello*, a constant change between territorialization and deterritorialization. The nomadic character of identity and space gives rise to an architecture of events, an urbanism of the situation, experienced in time by the nomadic entities in ourselves. As such, the city’s nomadic geography guarantees the presence of a strangeness that is possibly the most essential characteristic of the city.

This reading of the city that we wish to develop is always pregnant with the desire to change the status quo. Rather than merely developing a way to read the city, it is therefore also about finding a way to intervene in the city, to find ways for progressive urban change. This is an irresolvable ambiguity that seems to enrich rather than undermine the reading of urban realities.

In the contemporary city, the strange is to be allowed to move into the interstices of the familiarity of settlement. London’s East End can be envisioned as such a space, where people come and go, collectivities are formed and broken again, where old ethnicities hybridize into new ones, cultural artefacts change meaning and the strange is encountered on the street. It is with the image of such nomadic spaces and identities that progressive politics can stimulate urban change in a world where urban planning has been used too often as a spatial technology of domination under the banner of betterment, order or progress. However, the theory of a nomadic geography should avoid multicultural relativism and be wary of underestimating the power of the dominant in shaping the city. How exactly can an urbanism be developed that faces this danger and offers alternatives from urban politics?

The marginalized collectivities in ‘us’ and in ‘them’ have invented habits and activities that are barely visible, and move in unnoticed spaces that are continually shifting. Through these spaces, these populations continually come together without being attached to a fixed location, a conquered place in the city. By gathering around the political table not merely the visible communities (the local council, the developers, the local neighbourhoods, the environmental groups, the home owner associations), and by introducing the more ephemeral collectivities that would otherwise not be considered accountable in the decision-making process, these ‘marginal’ entities — skaters, artists, wanderers, the people that walk their dog — can change something in the city. It is
important to realize that these ‘abnormal’ collectivities are parts of us. Rather than proposing another dichotomy between the normal and fixed identities and marginal nomadic ones, the multiplicities of normality and ‘marginality’ in each of the users of the urban territory needs to be recognized. Where do people like to spend their time? Do they only spend it in their house, at work, and in shops and restaurants? Where do people grow their vegetables, encounter the unnoticed, walk their dog or have a picnic? Where do children build their dens and find spaces where they are absolutely free to play? Everybody can be a Cain, the owner of the land, and an Abel, the wandering shepherd, at the same time. By allowing the strangers inside us to sit around the discussion table, we might be able to avoid communities closing their borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’, in order to start the communication of collectivities.

This might be one step towards the development of a nomadic geography that invigorates progressive politics, by recognizing and pushing the strange in constructions of space and identity. Progressive politics is then finally to preserve and open up gaps and folds in the homogeneous space to allow for resistance, and to discover new spaces that are neither friends nor enemies, neither inside nor outside. ‘Spaces in transit have grown up, territories in continuous transformation in time and space, seas crossed by multitudes of “outsiders” who hide in the city. Here new forms of behaviour appear, new ways of dwelling, new spaces of freedom. The nomadic city lives in osmosis with the settled city, feeding on its refuse and offering, in exchange, its presence as a new nature, a forgotten future spontaneously produced by the entropy of the city’ (Careri, 2002: 188).

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References

Towards a nomadic geography


