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HATCHING THE UGLY DUCKLINGS OF GLOBALIZATION: MEGACITIES BETWEEN VISIONS AND ILLUSIONS

Summary

The power of globalization, its contradictions and frightening side effects have obviously created a new image of humanity - distorted and scrambled by the uncountable flows, challenged by its own limitations and structured around growing expectations. Therefore, the problem of contemporary megacities, especially those placed on the periphery of the global networks, represents just an introduction to the chaotic urbo-centric vision of our future which will, undoubtedly, impose a new constellation of development priorities. Shadowed by the glittering envelopes of the neo-liberal capitalism and overburdened with the multiplying setbacks, these unique 'representatives' of the new world order frequently shape the reversed picture of on-going processes. Their weaknesses are magnified, qualities diminished but the 'globalized' pattern still exists hidden under the layers of poverty, congestion, pollution and ignorance.

Launched into the limelight of the world attention, the numerous megacities have caused various controversial interpretations and manipulations. Therefore, the main purpose of this text is to establish a new relation between proclaimed global imperatives and their implications in the sensitive environment. The patterns of uncontrolled development, some recent actions, initiatives and visions will be juxtaposed revealing the other side of current problem(s), questioning (un)expected potentials and upgrading the picture of the global mega-chimeras.

Liberalism or nihilism, materialism or idealism? The path to the future is blurred and uncertain.

Mirroring the globalization

The contemporary globalization, through its economical, political and cultural waves, has imposed new modes of urban reality, based on the post-modern logic of disjunction and numerous possibilities, forced fragmentation and negated wholeness. The contraction of space and time, the urban growth and urban development have become global imperatives, while the competition for the leading position in the global network of power reflects true nature of modern cities. Supported by the world capital and changed organisation of production, services and market, urban nodes form their internal and external networks, redefining the importance of spaces, processes and flows. Creating a new symbolical vocabulary based upon contemporary interpretation of the globalized world, they become the meta-symbols of the New World order, a re-presentation of the global perception and a metaphor of the latest existential model with the shaken post-modern foundation.

Obviously, under the influence of the neo-liberal rules and the information revolution, our urban world has begun its new incarnation. The cities, continuously excited by internal and external stimulations, have become the incomprehensible fusion of multiple levels, time sequences and spatial segments, whose authenticity is constantly challenged and provoked.

The differences and individuality are highlighted, the reality is augmented, while the tensions between global trends, local limitations and questionable outcomes are strongly emphasised.

The technology reduces the importance of 'the place', rapidly increases the number of different matrixes and creates various faces of the 'global community'. Like the ancient Indian god Shiva, who, from the centre of vagueness emits all the diversities of the world, globalization expresses a dualistic nature of our reality - destructive and beneficent, but miraculously ordered to function on multiple and differentiated communication levels. Therefore, the network society (Castells, 1996) and mass media urbanism (Clark, 2000) characterize the new global world which deletes physical borders and degrades their importance, favouring the symbols transmitted by the fashionable urban structures and urban life style.

However, the alluring network society has generated its counterpart(s), readable in all hierarchical levels and particularly noticeable in megacity formations. Representing the testimony of the recent urban turbulences these nodes comprise the growing problems of migrations, rapid densification, segregation, poverty and environmental degradation. The myths of globalization - cosmopolitanism, identity, community and networking, could be still recognized and decoded but the proclaimed motors of the global success - connectivity, profit and sustainability, seem to be forgotten in this chaotic scenery. Placed too far on the global horizon they are mimicked by the loud rhetoric or lost somewhere in the unknown territory of immaterial flows.

Living in the limbo

The 'megacities', classified as emerging, gateway, global, world or non-world urban entities, positioned on the core, periphery or in the black holes of global networks have been focus of numerous debates among scholars dealing with the issues of their role, hierarchy, paradoxes, potentials, threats and - future. Originating from different social, cultural, political and economical backgrounds a number of urban nodes have been labelled by this resonant term, causing the certain confusion and shifting the attention from one problem to another (for ex. Fuchs at al., 1994; Castells, 1996; Taylor, 1999; van der Merwe, 2004; Short, 2004; Davis, 2006; Taylor, 2007). However, all megacities have one thing in common - a huge gap between 'globalized' elite and 'localised' pariahs, which cannot be bridged by conventional strategies and tools. The discrepancy between demographic and economic growth, as well as the parallel world of illegal settlements, informal economy and social exclusion are just some of the multiplying problems without adequate solution.

Evidently, the vicious spiral of globalization backed by the unprecedented urbanisation flow is not always supported by the exponential economic development and necessary infrastructural investments. Still, in spite of their weaknesses, (mega)cities are perceived as a wishful setting for millions of newcomers searching for the freedom of choice, vague opportunities and higher integration. Unfortunately, the uncontrolled influx of new residents leaves some of the largest urban areas caught in the web of tensions, confrontations, inequality and polarizations. The slum formations, described and analyzed by numerous authors, have become a new challenge for the 3rd millennium - sheltering about one third of the world's urban population, especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These alienated and unmapped enclaves of the urban poor, as well as the dazzling islands of the urban rich, create a unique environment full of intense transformations, new modes of social interaction, (dis)continuity and multiple identities which willingly or unwillingly intersect each other.

The resulting ethnical, cultural, social and professional diversity, emphasised by the physical and virtual infrastructure (or the lack thereof), creates completely homogenized fragments promoting this unusual collage of local-global values as a unifying force of the evolving formal and informal networks. The final output of this process is very unclear - instead of making the limitless spaces and increasing the physical and information speed, megacities and their citizens are looking for a new kind of defence and a strong point of reference which will provide an anchor in the world of increased mobility and placelessness.

Furthermore, the 'New Fear', which we are facing at the moment (De Cauter, 2004), has the same effect in the centre or on the periphery of the global world, within a gated community or a slum. Consequently, the compulsory (over)protection provides the spatial and social inclusion of 'privileged' ones (inhabitants), while the exclusion of others becomes the collateral damage of the latest demarcation method. People, overexposed to numerous stimulations, create the self-sufficient cocoons where the space does not become the place but a placeless fragment circumscribed by video-surveillance, private security, 'smart' gates or local gangs.

However, the tempting maze of the existing interregnum has shed a new light on the twilight zones of globalization, simultaneously causing overoptimistic eulogies, apocalyptic conclusions, rhetorical questions and a melange of intellectual snobbism and post-modern l'art pour l'artism. As a result, Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro, has become a kind of exotic theme park for adventurous travellers eager to experience the trilling surrounding of this 'vibrant' place. Lagos is recognized as a new model for structuralism, with complex formations and flexible occupational strategies which connect 'friction zones' to the infrastructural networks (Koolhaas). Finally, Dharavi - Asia's largest slum placed in Mumbai, is glorified as the most inspiring economic model in the region and a signpost for the recycling industry of the future. The fact that this area also 'acts' as a waste disposal for the city and some highly developed countries is usually - and conveniently - overlooked.

The cynicism of the superiors, the irony of the globalization or a new type of synesthesia? Today, the answer hardly matters at all - while waiting for the applicable and efficient solutions, even these stories could fuel the global attention providing the short-term benefit for the marginalized communities.

After all, the ethics was never the first one on the list of global priorities.

Strategies of survival or experiments *in vivo*?

The development of underdevelopment (Frank, 1969), easily detectable in the contemporary megacities, is not just a picture of disorder, conflicts, pressure and risk, but a serious test of urban and human endurance. The urban contrasts are exaggerated, the roots of the crisis are intricate and diverse while the necessary support appears to be distant and insufficient. Therefore, the growing problem of slums - as the Pandora's box of our century - cannot be solved by traditional strategies and tools which do not follow the dynamic and scale of the recent urban transformations.

The usual manifesto, created from the pedestal of power and profession, is quite elaborated. It proclaims democratic and ecologically sound environment, social cohesion, mediating processes, PPP and ICT, urban imaginaries and self-recognition, informality and flexibility, interaction and satisfaction. However, the reality often dilutes this concentration of knowledge and good intentions presenting the bare truth - embedded in the incomprehensible and rigid armature of unconditional living, unavailable funds, unskilled labour force or overlapped geographies of power, habits, beliefs and crime. Thus, eradication, translocation, rehabilitation, adaptation or questionable 'beautification' of these areas are just some of the methods applied in various situations. Reflecting the socio-economic and political conditions they reinforce paradoxes, weaknesses and the general collision.

When the patience reaches its limits, the reaction of ignored local communities could be quite radical like in the case of Abahlali base Mjondolo - the movement of shack dwellers in Durban. They organised a road blockade in 2005 asking the democratic rights and refusing the interference of political parties and NGOs. Since then, their idea and demands for political inclusion have spread throughout the region, crossing the borders and receiving the media attention. In contrast, the Kibera Community in Nairobi have chosen another path. This 'illegal settlement' launched its own web-site and SHOFECO initiative (Shining Hope for Community) which deals with the problems of youth and their potentials in the field of communication and information, sport, theatre, health and sanitation.

Evidently, the slum communities do not accept marginalisation and isolation imposed by the global elite. Rejecting the unfair stigmatisation and further disconnection from the urban life they are charting themselves on the map of 'official' urban identities, developing the sense of pride and belonging. Unfortunately, this could be a very difficult task, especially without the political determination, financial support and mediation. However, the overall picture could be brighter and some innovative examples represent the impetus for the future actions, revealing the importance of inclusive approach and endogenous planning process.

The cases of Bogotá, São Paulo and Caracas are based upon successful and creative urban management which traced the comprehensive egalitarian transformation. The cities focused their attention on the problems of slum dwellers - transportation, connectivity/accessibility, safety and quality of public spaces, new educational facilities and networks of pedestrian and cycle routes. These actions, encouraged by mixed programmes of investments, definitely re-energized the informal areas as well as the whole city.

The participation of community members in the process of design, planning, implementation and management also plays a crucial role in a number of cases. For example, the rehabilitation project for 'Favela-Bairro' in Rio de Janeiro was structured around three main approaches - physical, social and psychological - which were also visible in the design strategy. This 'experiment', backed by the governmental institutions, NGOs, professional and neighbourhood associations, local and international funds, increased the urbanity and integration of the slum area, improved the living conditions and general safety. However, its sustainability has to be verified.

The same logic is included in the activities and projects conducted by the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) in India which supports two movements - the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan. Oriented toward the problems of urban poverty, their initiatives offer solutions for basic infrastructure and sanitation (for ex. Chikhalwady Sanitation project in Mumbai) or affordable housing (Turbhe Mandale).

Some spontaneous settlements introduce even more advanced, but mostly informal services which provide digital connectivity and (informal) public transportation (Lima). As a result, the contact between all groups/levels of citizens is increased and a new middle class is created inside the slum areas.

Finally, the sensitive and degraded tissue of slums has become an important concern of the international organisations, raising the problem to the global level. Consequently, the action plan 'Cities without Slums', developed by the Cities Alliance in 1999, offered a specific targets and actions which should directly and/or indirectly improve living conditions of marginalized groups in urban slums by the year of 2020. These ideas were incorporated in The Millennium Development Goals and followed by the set of UN Programmes, such as the Slum Upgrading Facility of UN-HABITAT focused on housing finance, community resources and values. Apart from the obvious benefits - acceptable level of tolerance, life conditions and sustainability, the idea should set up new development perspectives, based upon mutual respect and confidence.

While this kind of programmes tends to heal the consequences of the uncontrolled growth and migrations, other initiatives anticipate the possible problems. For example, the SHAKTI Project (Sustainable Holistic Approach & Know-how Tailored to India) represents a part of the programme initiated by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2004) in order to connect research institutions of the selected countries and regions with local institutions and groups responsible for local development of mega-cities of tomorrow. Consequently, in the case of Hyderabad, the gap between reality and visions, population pressure, inadequate infrastructure systems and 'wannabe global' imperatives directed the project goals to the long-term sustainable development. Therefore, the main role of this project is to prevent further degradation of the urban environment shaping the acceptable vision of the future.

The dichotomies of the globalized world have obviously caused the disintegrative features of the urban environment which cannot be simply annulled or ignored. Meanwhile, the world of slums should not be treated only as a global alert or a catchy phrase but as an unavoidable parameter of the further globalization, with all its advantages and drawbacks.

The remedy for the urban dysfunction obviously exists and it is implanted in the comprehensive all-inclusive strategies and multiscale interventions.

The only question is - are we capable to face the reality, prevent the further dilapidation and finally act?

Tempting (the) future or *status quo*?

Nowadays, it is not so impossible to perceive the world as a number of isolated and artificial environments, with a limited communication and interaction between the 'inner' and 'outer' entities. Subordinated by the numerous enclosures and prerogatives of protection, our cities are transforming themselves into the collection of contemporary (anti)utopias or, according to Foucault (1986), *heterotopias*. They, all together, depict our century - based upon desanctified time and not entirely desanctified space full of oppositions.

Evidently, the network society has changed our personal and global perception, which is noticeable in everyday life. This time, the contemporary *cardo* and *decumanus* are twisted and raised high above the three-dimensional image of terrestrial orientation getting their new significance through the recently promoted determinative elements - communication and movement, security and accessibility. In the world of sharp contrasts and multiplying identities, these 'mantras' are shared both by the rich and the poor - as generators, activators or mediators of all urban processes.

The future of megacities obviously depends on innovative approaches/processes and self-correcting iterations which should prevent further degradation, indolence and decline. Of course, it is difficult to synchronise the needs of all actors, imposed institutional frameworks, international/national standards and bureaucratic drawbacks, but it is clear that the future looks more promising with the assistance of informal and indirect instruments, supported by high technology or forgotten human potentials. Unfortunately, the problem of implementation usually remains. The innovative and creative solutions, as well as powerful data-bases, computer analysis and simulations are helpless in front of the exploding conflicts, political manipulations or overwhelming corporative power. Therefore, a number of great ideas, projects, in-depth inquiries, debates and negotiations have become just a newfangled professional exercise, without the expected result.

The latest rules of the global game certainly shape the new ambivalent hardware of globalization, but the software remains pretty much the same - people with their needs, wishes and expectations, searching for the real and virtual shelters, (de)limitations and challenges. However, the possibilities of the modern interface(s) are still unexplored.

Maybe the megacities, with their numerous identities, signs and codes could really make a difference.

*"This- is now **my** way. Where is yours?
Thus did I answer those who asked me 'the way'.
For **the** way- it does not exist!"*

"Thus Spake Zarathustra"
(Friedrich Nietzsche, 1997, p.190)

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