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Rethinking Urban Inclusion

Spaces, Mobilizations, Interventions

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Introduction

The international conference, “Rethinking Urban Inclusion: Spaces, Mobilizations, Interventions,” was held 28-30 June 2012 in Coimbra, Portugal. The conference was the major event of the *Cities Are Us* series of events¹, which constituted the last step of a two-year collaboration between the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra and the United Cities and Local Governments’ (UCLG) Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (CISDP). The joint CES/UCLG project “Observatory of Inclusive Cities” (2010-2011)², creating the second phase of the UCLG Observatory on Social Inclusion, had collected a series of innovative participatory and inclusionary practices from around the globe to inform and stimulate an international debate on the issues that emerged within the project’s cases. The 2012 events aimed to extend this work and create a dialogue among the academic community, social movements and political institutions to help rethink some pivotal concepts related to the emergence of inequalities in urban territories.

The conference featured 124 speakers in a series of panels, parallel sessions and roundtables. This issue of *Cescontexto: Debates* contains 57 papers that were presented and discussed at this conference and revised following the event. The papers examine and illuminate a wide array of urban circumstances, trajectories and issues, from 29 countries around the world: Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Italy, Macedonia, Mozambique, Palestine, Peru, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United States of America and Vietnam. Both the variety of situations examined and the commonalities of the issues and concerns articulated within the papers attest to the value of the international knowledge sharing, exchanges and dialogues that were facilitated through the conference.

With almost half the world’s population living in cities, questioning the urban dimension of social inclusion and exclusion is imperative. Urban inclusion is increasingly influenced – and often constrained – by intertwined processes of economic globalization, state re-articulation, polarization and diversification of (local) populations and the political practices they add to the city. Educational, health and environmental inequalities, segregation, unemployment, lack of political participation, discrimination and the inability to deal with different forms of participation are all phenomena of exclusion with a local dimension but also a multi-scalar nature. At the same time, actions towards social inclusion are developed around ideas, knowledge(s), experiences, resources and capacities which are (dis)located across an array of arenas and distributed among different actors. While traditional concepts

¹ *Cities Are Us* Preparatory Seminars were: “Cidades Sem Muros – contributos da academia na área da deficiência” (Cities without walls – inputs from academia in relation to disability); “Alojamento Estudantil e a cidade inclusiva” (Students’ accommodation and the inclusive city); “Racismo na UniverCidade: debates e desafios” (Racism in the UniverCity: debates and challenges); and “Rumina(c)ções urbanas: contar a cidade numa ‘roda de histórias’” (Urban rumina(c)tions: tell your story at the table of voices). The international conference was followed by a Summer School, “Reinventing the City: Participation and Innovation,” which was co-organized in Lisbon by CES and Dinâmia’CET – ISCTE-IUL. For further information, see: <http://www.ces.uc.pt/eventos/citiesareus/pages/pt/all-the-events.php>.

² The Inclusive Cities Observatory, with 65 case studies available in English, French and Spanish, is available at <http://www.uclg-cisdp.org/observatory>.

and practices of urban inclusion centred on institutions and top-down decision-making seem inadequate to tackle this complexity, new ones are often in their infancy and may be in tension with more established policies. Contesting the centrality of the state and market pervasiveness, a new variety of counter-hegemonic positions and projects, and alternative visions of urban democracy and justice that inform bottom-up and participatory approaches to urban inclusion, have become popular in the Global South, while their transposition to cities in the Global North have met resistance or hardly gone beyond theorization.

The conference aimed to understand and ultimately rethink social inclusion at the urban scale, as the product of broader dynamics and the interaction of different actors and languages. How can we trace, define and challenge the new subtle forms of social and territorial exclusion, trying to reinvent urban inclusion as a meeting space between local governance efforts and bottom-up initiatives? Is it possible to think a novel approach to understanding these changing cities, using as a ‘lever’ images of ‘the power of powerlessness’ and the struggles against/within established systems? Within this perspective, the conference welcomed contributions balancing description, explanation and prescription, with the goal to contribute to an ‘ecology of knowledges’ which could give visibility to new forms of collective action and community experimentation in reshaping cities in different contexts, in order to set the preconditions for a more solid horizon of social and territorial justice at both urban and extra-urban scales. We invited participants to rethink urban inclusion along three intertwined axes – Space, Mobilisations, Interventions – and the contributions received reflected the interconnected nature of thinking and actions along these axes.

In order to help readers navigate the collection, we have organized the papers into five general thematic categories:

- Local Government, the Social and Evictions for the New City
- Urban Environmental Justices and Greening the City
- Practices of Urban Protest and the Right to the City
- Urban Histories, Architecture, Public Spaces and Participation Practices
- Spaces, Differences and Cultural Actors as Agents in Urban Change

Local Government, the Social and Evictions for the New City

Planning for an inclusive and justice city has been a ‘slogan’ for many local governments with social convictions. Nevertheless, different definitions of *inclusion* and *justice*, as well as different planning scales (i.e., urban vs. regional) may challenge and ultimately invalidate policies of spatial justice. The papers in this section propose different concepts for an inclusive city, such as “Social Mix,” “Public Participation,” or different public programs such as “Public Spaces of Humanization” and “Vila Viva,” analyzing positive or negative effects through a range of case studies in both the North and South, namely, Lisbon, Maputo, Recife, Belo Horizonte, Rome, Paris, Istanbul, Béjaïa and Skopje. Two main ideas arise from these approaches. First, that formal (local governments) and informal actors can or should work together on the design of urban policies for an inclusive city, looking for “other ways of participating,” as Federica Gatta recommends. Second, that transformation of urban space as an instrument of social rehabilitation must understand “the mechanisms leading to exclusion,” as Camille Morel explains.

Urban Environmental Justices and Greening the City

With the progressive urbanization of society, the urban environment is threatened by the growing privatization of public goods such as water or open space, promoting spatial injustice and exclusion in the city. Urban and peri-urban communities in different contexts, North and South, have been struggling, sometimes successfully, to defend their access to clean air, water and soil as well as their right to have a voice in decisions on how urban space should be used. We find this social environmental responsibility addressed in papers related to the complex society of the São Paulo metropole. Other papers in this thematic area demonstrate the strong presence of urban agriculture experiences as a strategy of rehabilitating urban voids and also integrating urban communities. From Lisbon to Maputo, Rome to Rio we understand that the city can combine rural with urban, and inclusively – some societies always did it as a productive and urban way of life. Human relationships with the urban environment, as we can see in the Hanoi case study, are not only a fight for a “Greener City” but also for a “Humanistic City” where citizens can have a healthy and inclusive society.

Practices of Urban Protest and the Right to the City

Social actions make claims for redefining the public significance and scope of squares, streets and parks. One of the main functions of such urban public spaces has been as places for assembly and protest, namely, to protest for the right to the city as a place of inclusion within the complex neo-liberal society. Public space is by nature a democratic place where people meet to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings. This democratic condition is underlined by social movements that are ‘occupying’ public spaces with urban protests against policies, social exclusion or environmental threats. This theme is divided into two complementary groups of papers. The first group is related to the different perspectives of the *Occupy* movements, analyzing their discourses and their social communities, especially composed of the young generations. Other papers are related to case studies where communities such as migrants or the Roma fight for the right to the city, whether in Coimbra, Milan, Philadelphia, Delhi, São Paulo or Fortaleza.

Urban Histories, Architecture, Public Spaces and Participation Practices

Governments at all levels have played and will arguably continue to play a major part in promoting social inclusion in its urban dimension. However, in the neo-liberal era, the notion of a light regulatory state is suppressing that of an interventionist authority, which is causing disinvestment in redistributive welfare and a ‘cheap’ commitment to formal equality. In this context, this thematic area reflects on the current nature, scope and effectiveness of public interventions of global and local governments. On one hand, the history of architecture and urbanism can teach us, today, some of the most relevant participation practices of past public interventions and the ideas, methodologies and impacts of significant urban projects to renovate the city and support communities, such as the significant case study of S. Victor in Porto, designed by Alvaro Siza, or the ZEIS in São Paulo. In parallel, another group of papers discusses concepts to rethink the ‘re-creation’ of city centers, for example, as ‘the night’, to look for the integration of *terrain vague* and to explore other participation methods through memory, psychosociology and public art, for instance.

Spaces, Differences and Cultural Actors as Agents in Urban Change

Territory has both physical and symbolic relations with the social and cultural life of the city, and this thematic area highlights the cultural dimensions of these relations. Three intertwined themes emerge. One group of papers examines various ways in which territorial imageries are socially and culturally produced (by those living there as well as imposed from outside) and change over time, have tangible impacts on urban relations, and are tangled up in processes of creating “re-emerging territories” (Pilav) and re-appropriating a city’s spaces and places. Second, the urban sphere as a crucible of difference and socio-cultural relations is brought into focus through examinations of particular groups, realities, and relations to public space and wider society, with papers highlighting children as sub citizens, youth developing perspectives on their place in community, or non-Aboriginal citizens living in the context of (post)colonial reconciliation processes. Third, the roles of artistic activity and cultural actors are foregrounded as catalyzing change and fostering new spatial relations and social connections, but also shadowed by “creative class imposition” (Alton and Cudmore) urban transformation initiatives, which may catalyze acts of resistance. Overall, collective memories and identities, contemporary functions of cultural heritage, the “spirit of place” (Hong and Ferero), and the creation of new imageries, meanings and social relations through artistic and socio-cultural activities are shown to have transformative power in building and changing the meanings of the city, relations with the urban territory and connections with each other.

We are entering a ‘post-institutional period’. The events that shook the beginning of 2011 are changing the political panorama of many countries and have clearly showed how traditional institutions alone cannot cope anymore with the needs and dreams of citizens. They also revealed the insufficiency of traditional social bodies and aggregations, especially from the perspective of the younger generations, who are designing new and often informal ways to make their voices heard in the political space. The Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra wants to promote spaces of discussion and stimulate cultural interaction on these topics, in continuity with its scientific interdisciplinary activity and its tradition as an Associate Laboratory interested in developing new and innovative analytical, theoretical and methodological instruments and approaches for interpreting and better understanding the specificities and complexities of contemporary societies.

In a world that is everyday more urbanized, cities are undoubtedly the stage for these ongoing fluid and dynamic changes. They are in flames in the Global South as well as in the Global North, and claims and aspirations of their citizens constitute the main sparks. These convulsions are enrooted in a new idea of inclusion, one that must tightly link redistribution and recognition of these new rising voices and must contribute to scouting and discovering voices that are as yet undisclosed. Squares, streets and parks are regaining their meaningfulness as pivotal places of this new wave of claims, and their new centrality takes shape through creative alliances with virtual networks, which seek to materialize their fights in a new holistic conception of public space.

How can we cope with this new panorama, where the word *city* itself acquires multiple and conflicting meanings in different contexts? How can we trace, define and challenge the new subtle forms of social and territorial exclusion, trying to reinvent social inclusion as a meeting space between local institutional efforts and bottom-up movements? Could the emerging pre-planning strength of the new insurgent citizenships converge onto a shared horizon and represent a critical mass for reconceiving and reestablishing the way of managing

cities? Is the heterogeneity of the state being pushed forward and enriched through the subsidiarity principle, valorizing both the proposals coming from non-state actors and the institutional levels closest to citizens? Is it imaginable to start to recognize and conceptualize a new macro-paradigm for these changing cities, one which will rescue and dialogue with the paradigms defined during the last 20 years on the role of social movements in the city, using as a ‘lever’ images of ‘the power of powerlessness’ and the struggles against/within established systems?

The *Cities Are Us* concept, for us, meant recognizing that a plural set of solutions to ‘re-found’ and re-negotiate cities as a space where polarization, segregations and exclusions can be concretely challenged can only be built together with the citizens in each different context. We believe that social and territorial justice could represent the central axis of future transformations. In a world where mechanic references to the concept of participation diluted it into an easy ‘buzzword’ that has allowed for a perverse confluence of opposite and conflictive visions on the future of cities, we consider that reaffirming the relationships between the role of inhabitants and the meaning of and quality of their living spaces becomes necessary.

From this perspective, the conference wanted to broaden the discussions that CES has been promoting in recent years, through several events and studies which address the still-long path to be pursued for the research world to recognize and understand the complexity of movements that are shaking the planet, and how necessary it is to adopt, at a larger scale, a dialogue framed by the ‘epistemologies of the South’ approach, a perspective that aims to complement current mainstreaming tendencies and reach towards greater epistemic justice. In the *Cities Are Us* series of events, these reflections were combined with those elaborated by a CES team of researchers, a large network of collaborators in other countries, and the Committee on Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy (CISDP) of United Cities and Local Governments during the 2010-2011 “Observatory of Inclusive Cities” project. Among a range of insights emerging from the case study analyses, researchers found that new approaches are being invented locally in diverse circumstances to address diversifying forms of social exclusion, situations in which ‘traditional’ forms of social policy are not working anymore and local governments, in all their diversity, are often not able to manage the issues and need to incorporate knowledge they do not have. The cases brought forward issues and insights relating both to the nature/concept of the city and to the understanding/concepts of local authorities, participation and tools for fostering empowerment. The papers in the current collection extend this knowledge, providing for our consideration, contemplation, and inspiration a wide array of situations, conditions, issues and options for action.

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