

Global cities, (un)rooted lives:

Towards a trans-scalar conception of citizenship

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Abstract

The question of how human subjectivity responds to urban life was as central to the founding fathers of urban sociology as it is to us today. Simmel's insight that urban life presents man with an unprecedented, and ever changing complexity, a cognitive and sensuous overload, which reflects back on individuals' awareness of themselves as multiply holds true, if not truer, of our crowded and densely populated cities as of the fin-de-siècle Berlin which inspired it to be first written. In this paper, we revisit this Simmelian classical theme with a view to critically re-examine contemporary approaches to urban democratic politics.

Keywords

Political participation, global cities, citizenship, "acts of citizenship"

1) The Self and the City

The question of how human *subjectivity* responds to *urban life* was as central to the founding fathers of urban sociology as it is to us today. Simmel's insight that urban life presents man with an *unprecedented*, and ever changing *complexity*, a cognitive and sensuous *overload*, which reflects back on individuals' awareness of themselves as *multiply* holds true, if not truer, of our crowded and densely populated cities as of the

fin-de-siècle Berlin which inspired it to be first written. As Simmel explains, ‘the psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli’ (Simmel 1950 [1903]: 11). This is a typically urban type of inquisitive ‘restlessness’, which stretches human capacity for self re-invention.

This sensuous overload, unavoidable under conditions of high density and close proximity, would be *insufferable*, if the urbanite did not immunise herself against *over-exposition* by building up successive layers of *artificiality*. First, she creates a *distance*, or an artificial *indifference*, towards the rapidly shifting *stimulations* she is exposed to. Since many of these spring from her bodily closeness, and fleeting external contact with ‘others’, many of whom migrants, alien to city life, the urbanite also develops a *negative* type of social conduct, a certain mutual strangeness, or *reserve* towards them. These ‘others’ are, typically, in the urban milieu, not intimates, but *strangers*. Strangers who remain strangers for a long time, or even in perpetuity. Strangers with whom social interaction is uncertain, and before whom urban dwellers must *exercise* a discerning capacity to *playact* the manners, conventions, and ritual gestures which *encode* the different social identities, in which they routinely unfold themselves.

But behind the external mask of cool impassivity through which urbanites interact with the complexities the city contains, behind their efficient performance of codified social roles, they experience their individual horizons being disturbed, burst and enlarged by the confusing diversity, unsettling unfamiliarity, and invincible strangeness of metropolitan life. This creative anxiety Simmel attributed to the ‘stranger’ could easily

be used to describe the experience of the big metropolis's dweller today. This, of course, provided that the segregationist and exclusionist tendencies which pervade hodiern city landscapes do not succeed in isolating urban dwellers in sanitised islands of similarity and sameness, preventing them of looking deeper into each other and, then, back, into themselves.

To the *multiplicity* of stimuli *without*, should it prevail, city dwellers often react by developing a similar *multiplicity within*: that is, multi-layered crosscutting images of their own identities, continually negotiated with the people most affected by each identity in question. They are no longer subject to *one* fixed, arbitrarily *given*, identity, sanctioned by the close social unit into which they were born. Their social identities can be *multiple, adaptive* and, above all, *constructed* in response to whom they interact with. This widening of the scope of identity construction allows urbanites to develop a *richer, kaleidoscopic* sense of themselves. Social interaction amongst city dwellers tends, therefore, to break down the rigidity of communally constructed and communally monitored social identities, and provides a favourable breeding ground for the creation of cultural and social hybrids, reflexivity and self-criticism.

Take, for instance, the case of the Irish diaspora in the US, and the formation of their migrant identities, in the urban context. As urbanites, they need no longer conceive of themselves as *just* Irish or American, American citizens or New Yorkers, speakers of English or Gaelic, philistines or bohemian, family men or gay. They can be a combination of 'some of these, all of these, and more' (Sennett 2001). This is not to say, of course, that different dimensions of one's multiple social identity will not, at least

occasionally, live an uneasy coexistence. But that uneasiness, caused by the underlying complexity of their patterns of belonging, is the foundation of individual freedom, especially freedom to experiment and reinvent oneself.

Throughout their modern history, cities have therefore been liberating: the privileged site where constructed social identities could be challenged, undermined, accepted, re-appropriated, re-negotiated and, then, finally, freely asserted, publicly, if not performatively, in the accessible shared spaces which, in the city, are subject to the competing visions of different groups. To paraphrase Weber, who himself was paraphrasing an old German saying, 'The air of the city makes you free'. Or would make if city-spaces, and the city mode of life, continues to promote access to alterity ('otherness'), to that exchange of one's own perspective for that of the 'other', which puts me in question and calls me to my responsibility.

2) Global cities as political arenas

This responsibility is also political. Global cities are increasingly depicted, in urban literature, as spaces with a critical economic and a critical political function. Given the rising importance of the informal politics of new social movements, including those formed amongst marginalized populations, the global city has been deemed the birthplace of a post-national or cosmopolitan conception of citizenship, formed around human rights regimes and exercised across state-borders (Held 1995; Habermas 1996, 2003). In the light of it, the modern conception of citizenship, associated with the

territorial nation-state seems, to many, an anachronism. This leads them to proclaim the inevitable decline of citizenship in the era of globalization (see, for instance, Falk 2000).

Citizenship means here a Western liberal type of bilateral relationship of rights, duties and mutual obligations between the individual and the state, founded either on blood (inheritance) or territory (place of birth). What global cities are thought to bring under attack is, therefore, state-centred citizenship, i.e. the affiliation of citizenship with the territorial state, and, its conflation with nationality, even if taken in political rather than the cultural sense (Sassen 1991). The argument is simple, if not simplistic. Global cities are the political arenas of the future; the territorial nation-state the form of political organization of a bygone era, an era where sovereignty, territory, nationality and citizenship coincided neatly.

In the traditional Westphalian order, each sovereign state comprised citizens with obligations and rights defined by their national citizenship statuses and their promises of exclusive allegiance to one state. In an emerging post-Westphalian order, we are told, our allegiances and platforms of action must be global, because global is the nature of the challenges we face. Chief amongst those platforms is the global city, conceived as the breeding ground of a new a global civil society, around which a post-national, cosmopolitan and distinctively global citizenship is, we are told, *forming* and, one could add, *performing* itself. Such would have seemed to be the case when, in February 15 2003, across North and Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Australia as many as 30 million people took to city streets to express opposition to the invasion of

Iraq (Koch 2003). The fickle global civil society presented then a tactile image of what it could be: an image captured by televisions and instantaneously disseminated through the Internet all over the world (on digital urban citizenship, see Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko 2012).

Albeit impressive, the intermittent public appearances of ‘global civil society’, such as the anti-war protest, we have just referred to, evoke as many questions as certainties about what is global about them. Distinctively global, one could say, is the networking, which led to the simultaneous action at a distance of different groups of demonstrators on that particular cause, on that particular day. Behind the performative unity of the demonstrators lies, however, a much more complex picture. Different demonstrators, in the various cities involved, arrived at their meeting points through the route of different affinity groups, sometimes distinctively local, and possibly for very different group and individual reasons. People may have acted at the same time, but it is doubtful that their coming together rested on shared ‘global’ values. A young left-wing British anarchist, who sees in the war the imprint of American imperialism, may well have marched on par with a Mormon pacifist, who rules out violence, even if revolutionary, and a Hezbollah sympathizer, who protested against what she saw as a Christian crusade, which could reinforce Israel’s position in the Middle East. Three people acting together on our TV screens, but in effect separated in their life-worlds, action motives, and intents, which are anything but global.

When one scratches under the surface, the ‘global’ may be not that global, and, what is more, have a doubtful representative status. Mobilised public opinion need not overlap

with public opinion. In most cases, it does not. And in the absence of explicit authorisation, any activists claiming to speak out on behalf of those who did not make to the streets put forth what is, at its best, a claim open to contestation. Which is not surprising: global society organisations are often Euro or America-centric, many co-opted by powerful interests, including those of states, and their only true constituency is, recurrently, their member base, or those who send a check from time to time. Their agendas and policies are therefore all too often the product of specialised professionals, detached from any grassroots, or affected parties, and their decisions taken by highly exclusionary boards, of a few people. Rather than being the all inclusive, horizontally networked, political playfield, which many authors envisage, civil society can easily reproduce within itself the world's most significant power asymmetries. In face of a civil society that falls so short of its normative ideal (Lupel 2005), legitimate questions arise as to the kind of citizenship it can sustain.

Besides civil society, democratic regionalism is another source of inspiration for the enthusiasts of post-national citizenship. Europe has undoubtedly made headway in diluting the link between citizenship and nationality. In the states of the Union, foreign nationals, of 3rd countries, if legal, enjoy on par with nationals the social and economic rights that are statutorily accorded to the later, although not their political rights. More importantly, perhaps, EU states have agreed on the establishment of a European citizenship, which could, in theory, be the embryo of a multiple citizenship of the layered kind. There is, however, plentiful evidence that the concept and the practice of European citizenship are exceedingly weak if compared with citizenship exercised at the national level. The exception is the liberties of movement, which are, at their heart, more *ius gentium* rights than specifically citizenship rights.

Besides the somewhat inflated claim that citizenship is being *highly* diluted by globalisation (see, for instance, how states, or groups of states, are trying to control flows of people, by re-categorising them, individually or in state-networks, as EU nationals/non EU nations; economic or political migrants; aliens, residents or fully fledged citizens, etc), there is another widely shared premise in the growing literature on global cities. This consists in that the transformations brought about by the process of globalisation are, after a few hundred years of hiatus, replacing the state with the city as the central object of political theorising. As Foucault has shown in the 70s, the process of state consolidation from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries took place not only at the level of institutions but also, and fundamentally, in the realm of political thought. The state appeared then, for the first time, as an object with measurable properties, such as its wealth and power, to be studied by political arithmetic, statistics and political economy. By contrast, medieval and early modern political thought was primarily occupied with cities and their troubled relationship with rising states (Isin 1999: 166). This historical legacy has been now re-appropriated by much urban literature. However, trying to draw lessons from pre-Westphalian experiences of urban citizenship to post-Westphalian ones is unwarranted. Underlying this comparative exercise is the belief that our rapidly changing post-modern reality demands conceptual tools that have not been contaminated by modern, state-centred categories. In this light, taking recourse of pre-modern conceptual grids appears to be a more promising theoretical strategy.

There however are several, well-rehearsed problems, with this sort of strategy. As much as we may feel reassured by historical continuities, the work of the *true* historian is to be open to the unfamiliarity of the past. Looking into past in search of answers for our problems, makes us turn the blind eye to what these really are. For instance, the present effects of global corporate capital upon the changing, fluid, and essentially de-territorialized, nature of *power* is unprecedented, and lives in a new tension with the *placeness* of city politics. This tension explains some current tendencies for urban disengagement and urban de-politicisation (Castells 1989; Bauman 2003; Sennett 2001).

Take, for instance, the case of the affluent and highly qualified global nomads, who currently circulate from metropolis to metropolis, with no particular inclination to participate in the civic life of the communities they temporarily join in. These include the foreign experts – locally known as ‘expatriates’ – who confer global character to many contemporary Asian megacities (Ong 2007). Cities like Beijing, Shanghai or Kuala Lumpur are strategic in Asian states ambition to accumulate foreign talent and creative know-how within borders. Asian global cities constitute, from this perspective, milieus of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, able to attract mobile managers, professionals, and scientists, who can help accelerate the accumulation of various sorts of capital. The move of the leading ‘citizenship’ scholar Bryan S. Turner from Cambridge to Singapore nicely illustrates this point. But the question his and other such cases raise is this: to what extent are such ‘nomadic’ professionals committed to the civic and political life of their host communities? (But see Nasir and Turner forthcoming.) Out of the 300 thousand expatriates living in Shanghai (a minority, for sure, but with potentially high bargaining power), a city of 14 million inhabitants, how

many have an active voice in the political affairs of the country? What is the actual influence of the expatriate communities of Shanghai, many of which ensconced in gated communities with names like Bellagio or Santa Monica, in the citizenship struggles of the Chinese?

Aihwa Ong, an anthropologist who has undertaken important ethnographic work on this topic, describes the type of political detachment that characterises these communities as ‘suspension of citizenship’. If work flexibility means less attachment to place, less vested interests in the city where one resides, and a general withdrawal from the public realm, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects of global cities as *the* political arenas of the future. This especially when the very feature that defines them as ‘global’ is, *precisely*, the a-politicized multitude of globetrotting professionals for whom the global city is a temporary setting of their career trajectory, a setting to which they relate first and foremost as consumers of municipal services.

Another point of contention is the dismissal of the state that these proposals presuppose: it is unwarranted, and premature. States continue to wield important mechanisms capable of contributing to shape social and economic contexts within their borders. Non-state actors (such as multinational corporations or NGO’s) on par with bodies politic (such as cities, regions or federations) cannot operate, or operate procedurally with a certain degree of fairness, without states. Despite all the claims pointing to the growing influence of corporations over world affairs, and the life of global cities, the fact remains that corporations have not taken over from states. Corporations need money to be printed, interest-rates to be set, while at the same time, they need to be

regulated. They turn out, as a matter of fact, to need far more regulation to prevent them from lapsing into sheer criminality, or recklessness, than it is commonly assumed. If in doubt, just think of the Enron scandal in the US (Strath and Skinner 2003: 1-2).

In insisting that states still matter, we are not denying that the urban scale of governance gained growing importance in the course of the past couple of decades. That much is undoubted (on the transnational urban region of Ciudad Juárez, see Staudt, Fragoso and Fuentes 2010). Cities are political arenas where important struggles for citizenship rights are to be fought, first and foremost, the right to the city itself, in face of observed tendencies of polarisation and inequality between social groups, privatisation of the public space, or housing market price distortions, to give but a few examples. This is a right that is owed to city dwellers, and originates obligations both on their part and on the municipal structures governing them (e.g. participatory budgets).

However, the literature on the revival of the urban scale of governance suffers from a recurrent limitation. Although it is written against the scalar mode of thinking which underpins Western modernity, the rescaling alternative it proposes, on the whole, expands rather than moves beyond it. Scalar thought is characterized as assuming exclusive, hierarchical and a-historical relationships among between different bodies politic, namely cities, regions, states and federations, and to conceal their fluid, multiple and overlapping forms of existence. Rescaling alternatives by suggesting that citizenship rights can be neatly disaggregated in different scales of governance, if possible eliminating the middle-layer, i.e. the state, reproduce the same logic but, now,

at multiple levels. The final section of this paper discusses some of the deficiencies of this approach.

3) Changing meanings of citizenship

Legal rights, especially economic and social rights, which used to be given only to national citizens are increasingly being claimed by non-citizens, who rest their claims in international rather than national law, for instance the European Convention of Human Rights, which confers them socio-economic rights. Another case in point is the de facto rights of undocumented immigrants, especially in the US, such as the right to be paid for work done. Dual citizenship, too, is being increasingly accepted by states who were formerly jealous of exclusive allegiance. The body itself has come to complement property and political membership as a site for legal rights. Millions of migrants have been granted welfare and economic rights, which amount to a 'quasi-citizenship', quasi-because orphan of a formal political dimension. Formal, because in cities with large non-citizen populations, migrants, even if illegal, tend to join in politics, while not being formally citizens, or having voting rights: they lobby for their interests, join in or organise their own street demonstrations, campaign for certain political candidates.

All of these are commonly presented as signs of globalisation undermining the role of the state in framing and defining citizenship. However, many of them can equally be seen as strategies that states are devising, and mostly devising together, in governmental networks, to cope with the pressures of globalisation, even if on their back foot (e.g.,

human right regimes, such as the ECHR, were created and are implemented by states). Nonetheless, as a consequence of these trends, urban citizenship has rightly returned to the centre of the political agenda, and rescaling theories, suggesting numerous ways in which the different components of citizenship can be disaggregated into the different levels of governance are increasingly taking shape.

Take the example of Rainer Bauböck's attempt at reinventing urban citizenship (Bauböck 2003), which constitutes a clear example of rescaling thought. His concrete proposals include, the following:

- 1) reunite cities with their peripheries in common jurisdictions;
- 2) mitigate the political impact of residential segregation through representation of urban districts in citywide decision-making bodies;
- 3) challenge national monopolies in immigration, trade and foreign policy;
- 4) establish a formal status of local citizenship that is based on residence and disconnected from nationality;
- 5) allow for multiple local citizenships and voting rights within and across national borders. (Bauböck 2003: 139)

Many of us would readily subscribe some of the above. For instance, to favour residence (in the sense of Lefebvre's notion of *inhabitation*) over nationality as the basis for local political membership is one of the best ways of dealing with the problem of

illegal immigrants, which tend to concentrate on urban areas. But proposals 3) and 5) are clearly farfetched: they charge urban politics to deal with the consequences of globalisation (e.g., growing economic immigration) with resources that globalisation (with the fluidity of its power) has rendered inadequate (on the French case, see Nicholls 2012). If states cannot deal with globally begotten problems, there is no reason to think that cities can. But more than that, they dangerously neglect the potentially implosive effects of one wearing multiple civic hats, and having multiple loyalties, as well as responsibilities, in that area which most requires states to act as *unitary* actors: that is, foreign policy.

Besides the unrealism of some of his proposals, there is another, more theoretical objection, to Bauböck's way of thinking. Is he really superseding the exclusive, hierarchical and a-historical logic he so readily criticises in scalar thought? It does not seem so. Note the way he ends his paper, by suggesting that: 'an urban citizenship that is emancipated from imperatives of national sovereignty and homogeneity may become a home-base for cosmopolitan democracy' (2003: 157). This conclusion clearly reproduces the rigidly stratified conception of the world he so openly dismisses. The costs of separating 'global', 'national' and 'local', while, at the same time, assuming that the latter is more intensely democratic than the state, because it is smaller scale, (let us call this the 'small is beautiful' assumption) are bigger than one might think.

Although there are numerous smaller-scale communities whose democratic credentials are beyond dispute, there is no necessary relation between the scale of the unit and the nature of its regime.

Consider the example of city-landscapes marked by social and spatial segregation, such as Sao Paulo. Teresa Caldeira's *City of Walls* is a study about Alphaville, an enormous gated community just outside São Paulo, where residents pay more in community dues than in taxes to the Brazilian government (Caldeira 2000). The political consequences of living among equals, in a secluded and sanitized environment, where the absence of physical encounter with the 'Other' is actively sought, and paid for, are well documented. But walls are not necessary for populations to live in cities with their backs turned on one another, and carrying only about their own backyard. For communities can be gated even where there are no physical walls in place: local self-organisation, according to group affinity, especially where combined with local decision-making autonomy, is on the whole an obstacle to political communication across difference, deliberation and negotiation across the polity, regarding, for instance, public services (e.g., quality of schooling).

If 'small' does not allow for, or encourage, the production of what Putnam would call 'bridging social capital', i.e. solidarity beyond one's own group, then local political communities which allow for the self-enclosure of yet smaller communities within themselves can turn out to be exclusionary, undemocratic and particularly harmful to the civic life of the polity as a whole (Oliver 1997). What is more, the general tendency of the last few decades has been exactly in this direction – in 1992, for example, 'there were 150,000 associations privately governing an estimated 32 million Americans' (Bickford 2000: 359), a figure that, if anything, has only increased in the past 15 years. In the lives of an increasing number of residents of global cities what counts as 'civic

virtue' is maintaining property values, and what counts as 'social responsibility', paying homeowner association dues. This means that, in a way, the suburban development that blossomed in the post-war period, first in the US, and later in the rest of the world, can be characterised as a 'secession of the successful' (Bickford 2000: 360).

Civic life certainly does not benefit from self-enclosure behind walls. Recall Morelly's *Code de la Nature* (1755) where he composes the model for Enlightenment's 'perfect city': a city where residents deserving 'civic death, that is, the life-long exclusion from society', will be locked in cave-like cells, next to the biologically dead, inside the 'walled-off graveyard' (quoted in Bauman 1999: 178). The widening of the gap between life-worlds, and their physical habitats, within the city necessarily promotes, if not the civic death described by Morelly, at least civic apathy and de-responsabilisation for the fate of fellow-citizens (on notions of citizenship held by people more generally, see Stack 2012).

But residential segregation, with its introverted production of meaning and identity, is not the only empirical indication that sub-national political units are not necessarily more thriving in their democratic lives. As Richard Sennett recently pointed out, the very flexibility encouraged by today's global capitalism seems to be associated with the growth of civic indifference in cities. Flexible capitalism leads teams to work together intensely, under great pressure, to reach output targets, set and recompensed by panoptic managers. But it also determines their relations to team-workers to be superficial, as once the task is finished, work associates change, and so do loyalties. As the founding fathers of urban sociology stressed, changes in the organisation of capital tend to leave a

powerful imprint in the social and civic life of the city. What is then the imprint of flexible capitalism in contemporary metropolises?

- 1) First is *physical detachment to place*: Temporary-work nurses, for instance, are 8 times more likely to move house in a two year-period than single-employer nurses; main-frame servicemen are 11 times more likely to move than their single-employers mates. Lack of fixed work means less attachment to place, which in turn promotes civic indifference, or a lack of concern with the affairs of their temporarily adopted cities.
- 2) Second is *standardization of the urban environment*: It is hard to become attached to a particular Tesco, Sainsbury's or Aldi: standardization, as Sennett stresses, begets indifference: sensory indifference, but also detachment from place.
- 3) Third, there are the *relations between family and urban work*: High-pressure, flexible work, profoundly transforms family life. It is not so much the problems of geographical uprooting as the codes of conduct which rule the workplace, codes that would shatter families if taken home from the office: don't commit, don't get involved, think short-term. (Sennett 1996: 7)

All of these pose important dilemmas of citizenship, dilemmas concerning the civic life of local political communities, where the existential condition of much of the population is now one of perpetual physical and mental *rootlessness*.

A third concrete indication that the ‘small is beautiful’ assumption is deceptive refers to the emancipatory role that, in many cases, states have performed and continue to perform, namely in promoting (municipal) citizenship, even if sometimes inadvertently, as an unintended consequence.¹ To focus exclusively on the sub-national, urban scale, may lead us to forget how central national citizenship has been for the civic emancipation of entire populations. The work on Mexican ‘mixed polities’ by the political scientist José Antonio Aguilar is exemplary in this regard. Citing Hobbes’ well-known warning of the dangers inherent in ‘mixed polities’, Aguilar contends that community autonomy has been a threat to effective citizenship in Mexico. He blames the Mexican state for this, because it has failed to provide public services, including justice and security, leaving these in the hands of smaller collectives, such as urban communities. And Aguilar shows how community autonomy has been used, and abused, to justify a variety of nefarious practices, including popular ‘justice’, administered as mob lynching (in Gordon and Stack 2007: 126).

Just as local politics need not be emancipatory, it should not be conceived as deliberative as opposed to representative politics of the state. As Louis Wirth stressed in 1938, any community composed of a larger number of individuals than can know or meet one another face-to-face needs to articulate interests by a mediated process of representation (Wirth 1938): such is the case with modern cities. Moreover, political equality, even in smaller political units, may be better served by formal representation, with its mechanisms of authorisation and accountability, than with *de facto* representation of a passive majority by the outspoken. Urban communities, segmented in local networks, which are often ethnically based, will often rely on identity to defend their interests, if not their collective fate. Close affinity, especially where mistaken for a

‘natural’ identity of interests, may not, however, in many cases, favour the principle of representation as difference, without which democratic deliberation has little incentive to occur. For what is democratic deliberation if not a participatory process of discussion of matters of common concern, in anticipation of, or in reaction to, acts of representatives, in the knowledge that, however identical, they are always (fortunately), other than us, and the ‘us’ they speak for not a pre-given entity, but one dialectically constructed in interaction with the multiple ‘us’ we effectively are? What is more, there is better hope that different groups within a polity, especially if very divided in their life-worlds, will open themselves to the discussion of their differences, if the ground for this coming together is prepared and widened by representatives, who must, by definition, be open to the possibility of changing and accommodating positions, in deliberation with fellow representatives.

4) Conclusion

In sum, our reservations concerning recent rescaling approaches can be summarized as follows. Reality is not a neatly stratified set of layers – local, national, global – in which human action acquires a sort of independent character. If one wishes to understand citizenship rights, one cannot simply disaggregate the various types of rights of the modern conception of citizenship and redistribute them according to different levels of governance. While it might be the case that the liberal paradigm privileged one particular level of governance (i.e., the state) at the expense of all the others, the alternative is not to disaggregate them in different levels, and privilege a new one in

turn (e.g. Cohen 1999). That would amount to the subscription of the scalar logic lurking behind the liberal paradigm one wanted to go beyond.

The crux of the question is that scale itself is a human construct. It is us who set the boundaries; it is us who define where a city ends and countryside begins; it is us who distinguish between local, regional, national and global levels of governance. Those who propose to associate certain levels of governance to the exercise of certain rights seem to forget this. There is no necessary relation between this particular scale and that specific type of right. One thing is our perception of the world as divided into multiple layers; another thing is to believe such perception to be the only possible one, and one that represents the world as it is.

A better alternative is to conceive of the city as a context of action in which the citizen, the rights she enjoys, the socio-economic background conditions and institutions that guarantee them, the economy that enhances and questions many of them, the consumer and political culture that transforms them, all contribute to define one another. It is an empirical question to determine the relative weight of each contribution (a good illustration of such an empirical approach can be found in Desay and Sanyal 2012). But the reach of each particular ‘act of citizenship’ can only be fully captured if one abandons a rigidly stratified logic, and sees it as the outcome of a plurality of intersecting factors, and as, at the same time, using and traversing, in their concrete embodiments, the inflexible constitution of scales.

An example might help us explain what we have in mind. Imagine a young woman protesting in Trafalgar Square against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The exercise of that particular citizenship right in that public rally in that city in that specific moment in time can only be understood if one conceives it as one such complex interface of factors and scales, in which the performance of that particular ‘act of citizenship’ incorporates elements from all other dimensions of reality: her right to demonstrate against a decision of her government is state-given; her exercise of that right is spatially local, dependent on previous authorisation of the local authorities, as well as on her capacity to buy herself out of work (even if only for a couple of hours); but the object of the act as well as its intended reach is trans-national (i.e., prevent a war elsewhere), as well as national (i.e., object to a decision of her government (‘not in my name’, was the slogan of many of the demonstrators), which implies the sending of British troops). The political values that motivate her action can be more or less global in scope, but, as she incorporates them, they are self-appropriated, and, as she acts, they are being redefined and redefining her. Such a process of incorporation, performance, and redefinition can only be grasped if one supersedes the common trichotomy between 1) citizenship as a legal status; 2) citizenship as identity, belonging and social status; and 3) citizenship as practice, and avoids lining up placing different rights on different spatial levels. In particular, the performance of any ‘act of citizenship’ always uses and overflows neat categories, or scales, and what is critical is how these overflows re-constitute citizenship through the struggles of different social groups. It is through the body of the citizen that the citizenship that unites them in a body of citizens (struggling to define the contours of their common fate) comes to life.

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¹ See, for instance, the case of Portugal, where the authoritarian state was first to consecrate the right to housing, which inspired a strong, albeit sporadic, municipal movement, lead by housing associations, in the aftermath of the 1974 democratic revolution.