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Pilon, André Francisco / A. F.
University of São Paulo

30. September 2010

Online at <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/25572/>
MPRA Paper No. 25572, posted 30. September 2010 / 16:19

“The Right to the City”

An Ecosystemic Approach to Better Cities, Better Life

André Francisco Pilon
Associate Professor, University of São Paulo
gaiarine@usp.br

As it does annually, the United Nations promotes in October the "World Habitat Day". Chronic problems - getting worse from year to year - are repeatedly reminded: the billion people who live in crowded slums and the like, the unemployed and out of school youth, roaming the streets and enticed by a culture linked to the symbols of consumerism, based on greed and ultimately responsible to the increased criminality.

Natural and built environments, essential values to a peaceful coexistence, are gradually undermined by powerful political, economic and technological forces. Problems, defined in a fragmented and reduced way by academic formats, market-place interests and mass media headlines, continue to grow, while public policies focus on the bubbles on the surface (consequences), ignoring what happens in the bulge of the boiling pot.

Meanwhile, the "most favoured" encase themselves in their strongholds closely watched, move about in armoured vehicles and relentlessly propagate the idea that economic growth is synonymous of quality of life, while the so called "middle classes" easily change cars year in and year out, dispute vacancies in the shopping centers and super-markets parking lots and persist in attributing street criminality to the “evil” nature of outcast people.

Leroux (1998), argues that, in the recent decades, rapid urbanization has transformed the cities of Latin America in chaotic centers of social conflict, plagued by the invasion of green areas by real estate building and illegal settlements, overwhelming use of private cars instead of public transportation, garbage cluttering and waste of all kinds, disastrous floods, climatic unbalance, air pollution and lack of drinking water.

Cities cannot continue to expand as privileged centers for profit and capital accumulation, to the detriment of quality of life. In the transportation sector, rather than increased car production, manufacturing of urban light rail vehicles (underground and surface), and of passenger trains for longer distances, would not entail the reduction of jobs (the metallurgical sector covering all these sectors) and clearly would contribute to reduce pollutant emissions and a better quality of life.

In cities that house the headquarters of UN-Habitat, delegates at international events are warned of the dangers surrounding their safety in Rio de Janeiro and Nairobi: armed robbery, kidnapping etc. (never attempt to be a hero!). Meanwhile, people seek to surround themselves with an apparent "safety net", incapable of addressing the cause of problems, because, in the first place, it could undermine their business and investments.

The necessary changes affect corporate interests and privileges, not just in private, but mainly in the public sphere; under the guise of "streamlining" the state, public policies persist in outsourcing services and public works, channeling huge funds for poorly executed and over-billed consultancies and contracts. Less money would be spent by restructuring the state and by the admission of qualified civil servants.

While "res nullius", things do not belong to anybody, but as "res communis" they belong to everyone. If a public good is a "res nullius", anyone can freely take ownership of it, since it has no owner, but if it is a "res communis", a collective good, its enjoyment is restricted to the general interest and should respect the rights of those who, for lack of means, resources, knowledge or opportunity, do not have access to it (Quéau, 2010).

Of course, the question is essentially political, because without corruption, spurious alliances between public and private interests clash with transparency and the restoration of institutional control over the affairs of state. The issue is also cultural, culture shapes individual and collective identities, values essential to preserve quality of life, builds the social significance of communal life and guides the expectations of the future.

The education and media - manipulated by restricted vested interests - "just developed a culture based on intolerance and violence" (UNESCO-EOLSS, 2008). To build sustainable cities is necessary to redesign social institutions and technologies. It is not only the right to urban resources, it is the right to change ourselves by changing the city: the kind of city we have is linked to the kind of human beings we are willing to be (Harvey 2006).

Being-in-the-world is more than living on it, it covers all modes of existence, namely, the relationship with oneself ("inner world"), the relations with those closest ("interactive world"), the relations with society as a whole ("man's world"), the relations with the environment, beings and things (Binswanger, 1963). In this sense, building quality of life depends on the combination of four existential "dimensions" (Pilon, 2009).

"Peace building", rights and duties should be understood as the culmination of a process in which the acceptance of ethical standards derive from a set of morally relevant social experiences throughout life, in which "cultural capital", personal identity, should not be the result of the "privilege" of belonging to groups seeking mastery upon others through ruse, violence and crime, whether in the streets or cabinets.

Authentic freedom (or freedom for) should not be confused with "freedom from" (Fromm, 1941), it is not the absence of external constraints, but the possibility of making critical options; it requires a capacity to make appropriate choices, in which self-interest is linked to the pursuit of common endeavours, helping the world to be a better place, and developing society as a whole, in view of a cultural transformation.

"The emphasis on human rights rather than on collective political action, merely reiterates individualistic approaches (Harvey, 2005). Thus, the role of public institutions is more than relevant; beyond personal motives and expectations, the proper functioning of the institutions have a decisive role in inducing the events and contributing to the desired changes, in view of new paradigms of growth, power, wealth, work and freedom.

Institutions determine the "rules of the game," stabilize the behaviours and interactions between people, create predictability and decide how the constituted authority is exercised, controlled and redistributed (March and Olsen, 1989). They create systemic confidence (not idiosyncratic), reducing the risks of citizens' dependency on the "good will" of influential people to solve public or private affairs.

Chronic problems due to the lack of urban planning (or its subordination to the interests of business corporations), are reflected in the growing distance between workplace and home, in the absence of leisure and cultural activities in neighbourhoods, in the widespread and intensive use of private vehicles for locomotion, in the precariousness of the means of collective transportation, in energy waste and increasing environmental pollution.

A society dominated by mass media, advertising and consumption, by public education policies averse to the formation of character and development of civic spirit, can only result in individuals which accepts any expedient to "get there", eager for immediate gains and power, uncompromising with the general well fare. The inclusion of more people in this system of things, only reproduce the system, in a vicious circle.

Beyond the interests of financial markets, business corporations and technologies embedded in global enterprises, scientists, philosophers and educators committed to cultural, political and economical changes in favour of new ways of being-in-the-world, warn that cities can not remain as

centers of capital accumulation and profit generation, but should care for the natural and built environment, for harmony and solidarity.

Solidarity is not restricted to the care for the most needy, but combines participatory democracy, leadership development and cooperative work, with a view to organizing and facilitating group of citizens committed to an integrated view of the various aspects of quality of life: education, culture, justice, labour, environment, health, safety, housing, leisure, transport, consumption.

Cultural inclusion cannot be a matter of mass communication, or of educational programmes exclusively devoted to professionalism and the market. We must preserve and develop the best that mankind has constructed through its history, the letters, the arts, philosophy. When will we be considered true citizens, in every sense of the world, instead of mere users and consumers?

This year, the United Nations proposed the following questions for the citizens of the world: What is the best thing about your city? What's the worst thing about your city? What do you want the authorities to do about it? What can you do about it? It is a clear attempt to foster civic participation and personal engagement, but to make things happen it is necessary to create active socio-cultural niches at many societal levels.

A socio-cultural niche is made up of a new structure, a core that differs from the system, able to create the necessary conditions to explore new ways of understanding things and generate new ways of being in the world, by building a "semiosphere" specific, consisting of new paradigms and meanings, involving discovery, interpretation and invention, as a essential condition to develop critical capacities to operate changes.

For its emergence, it is necessary that public policies and a multitude of agents in different areas (education, culture, health, leisure, environment, etc.), demonstrate a clear commitment in view of an integrated ecosystem approach, favourable to the development, in the social-cultural niches of citizenship, of a critical judgment regarding the current paradigms that underlie the political, economic and cultural models.

Of course it is a process in the medium and long term, but short-term arrangements are available to everyone, especially those who work in areas crucial to human development such as education, culture, health, environment, justice, politics and economy. People, groups and organizations that want a overall change, the construction of a new social fabric and not just to put patches on tissues already worn to shreds.

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About the Author: The author has an extensive career as an Associate Professor at University of São Paulo, as a Psychologist, at the Court of Justice of the State of São Paulo, as the Director of Brazil's Health Education Department, as an Editor-in-Chief of the cultural and scientific journal *Academus* (BLISSN 0001-4230). His activities include the development and evaluation of public policies and teaching and research programmes encompassing physical, social and mental well-being, environment, education, culture, society and quality of life, integrating different scientific domains: social sciences, anthropology, psychology, education, ethics, economics and politics. He has been recognised for his intensive labour, assuming and sharing responsibilities for planning and evaluation of public policies, field projects and research and teaching programmes, being the author of scholarly articles and essays in scientific journals worldwide, book chapters, official reports, oral and written presentations at different scientific events, at national and international level. Publications and Public Profile Website: <http://www.connectcp.org/profiles/profile.php?profileid=1444&lang=en>