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The European City as a Bulwark of Resistance against Neoliberalisation

Zuidhof, P.W.

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A satellite night view of Europe, where the landmasses are silhouetted against a dark blue background. The cities and urban areas are illuminated with a dense pattern of bright yellow and white lights, creating a stark contrast with the dark surroundings. The lights form a complex network across the continent, highlighting major urban centers and their surrounding metropolitan areas.

Urban Europe

Fifty Tales of the City

EDITED BY

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen

Urban Europe

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Fifty Tales of the City

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen (eds.)

AUP

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The European Union conquers the city

Soon the European Union will be visiting your city too. That is the message of the Urban Agenda that was recently drawn up by the European Union. The EU tends predominantly to be associated with 'Brussels', supranational bureaucrats and the political tug-of-war between Member States and heads of state. In a city you only really tend to run into the European Union when, in the context of the rotating presidency, the European Council sets up shop there, such as happened in Amsterdam during the first six months of 2016. Currently, we only think of the 'European city' as the site of international treaties or important policy proposals: Rome, Schengen, Dublin, Maastricht, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Bologna, Nice, Lisbon. However, this is changing with the arrival of the Urban Agenda, which was published by the European Commission in July 2014.

The key principle behind the Urban Agenda is that many of the economic, environmental and social policy challenges faced by the European Union apply mainly to urban contexts. It therefore makes sense to involve cities more intensively in the implementation of policy and ensure that this policy better reflects the urban reality. With this initiative, the European Union seems to be making a conscious attempt at sidelining the national level of Member States and making direct policy interventions where they can have an immediate impact. At the same time, it is bringing its policy closer to citizens. This proposed change of scale in EU policy raises the question of how it imagines the

European city. How does the European Union legitimise its urban policy, and what political rationale can be inferred from it? And how well does the political rationale propagated by the EU stand up when compared to the everyday reality of urban life? When EU policy ventures into the city, what reaction can be expected?

The European Union and the city: A rescaling of neoliberal policy

The EU lays out the key idea behind its vision on the city as follows: 'Cities play a key role in implementing EU policy, including the Europe 2020 strategy.' This reveals that the EU does not formulate specific urban policy as such, but sees the city mainly as a fertile microcosm for the implementation of existing EU policy. The Urban Agenda, then, mainly seems to be a *rescaling* of existing supranational policy. The 2010 Toledo Declaration, which preceded the Urban Agenda, assigned cities a similar strategic role in achieving the Europe 2020 objectives: 'Cities and towns are vital for achieving the general objectives and specific headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy.' In other words, European policy puts the city exclusively in the service of the Europe 2020 objectives. From the EU's perspective, the European city is primarily a place in which to create smart, sustainable and inclusive economies which contribute to increased employment, higher productivity and greater social cohesion.

I would argue that, by making urban policy all about the Europe 2020 targets, the city is – intentionally or unintentionally – co-opted into a neoliberal policy framework. In this context, 'neoliberal' means that the interests of the economy and market forces represent the core value, legitimation and rationale underlying the policy. The reason to call Europe 2020 'neoliberal' is that this policy is predominantly legitimised by reference to economic or market criteria. Like its predecessor, the Lisbon Agenda, the Europe 2020 strategy is informed by the notion that Europe is competing economically with the rest of the world – a

notion that has only been reinforced by the 2007 financial crisis and its continuing impact on the euro crisis. Where the Lisbon Agenda aimed to overcome the crisis by making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy, with the Europe 2020 strategy attention is shifting to a competitive economy focused on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The strategy is not neoliberal so much because of the economic goals being pursued, but essentially because the policy is based on economic values, with non-economic measures also being motivated by economic criteria. The EU is not striving to bring about smart, sustainable and inclusive cities as a goal in and of itself, but because they are seen as a driver for further economic growth. In this type of policy, economic growth is seen as both the core value and the vehicle of the policy, which means that policy is focused entirely on an economic rationale.

In order to get some insight into how, under the banner of 'Europe 2020', the European Union's urban policy is taking a neo-liberal turn, it is helpful to compare it with the urban policy that was being pursued under the Cohesion Policy. It has been noted before that the Europe 2020 strategy, like the Lisbon Agenda, seems to be the product of a mixed, hybrid political rationale. On the one hand, it is informed by typical market goals such as economic growth and competitiveness, but it also contains more socially-orientated goals such as job creation, sustainability and social cohesion. What is the relationship between these two different sets of criteria? The Cohesion Policy was initially primarily focused on employing initiatives like the Structural Funds to help regions and cities that were at risk of falling behind as a result of the establishment of the single market. In other words, the social rationale mainly existed as a way to redress an imbalance that had been created by the market rationale. Europe 2020 turns this relationship on its head, making the social rationale subordinate to the market rationale. Cities need to become smarter, more sustainable and more inclusive to be competitive, and it is only through economic growth that social objectives can be achieved. In this situation, the market rationale

determines the social rationale. Another difference is that, under the Cohesion Policy, cities were primarily recipients of funding, whereas in Europe 2020 the city is primarily mobilised as the executor of policy. Cities are not viewed as the passive objects of social policy, but as active tools in making this policy a reality. These are two examples of how, with the rescaling of the Europe 2020 strategy, the city is incorporated into a predominantly neoliberal policy rationale.

The European city: Neoliberal or post-neoliberal?

How will cities respond to the proposed rescaling of the Europe 2020 strategy and the concomitant neoliberalisation of urban policy? The Urban Agenda will be able to count on the broad overall support of local authorities – not only because they contributed to the drafting of the policy via consultation forums such as the CITIES Forum or the Covenant of Mayors, but above all because it chimes with an existing neoliberal approach to policy already present in cities themselves. Many cities are happy to get on board with the idea of strengthening their economic competitiveness and innovative capacity, becoming more sustainable or combating poverty, and have embraced the sort of neoliberal policy approaches that are associated with it, such as city marketing or policies aiming at attracting businesses (known as business location policy). However, since the onset of the financial and economic crisis and the ongoing repercussions felt in the euro crisis, it appears that cities are becoming the main bulwark of resistance against the advance of neoliberalisation. Neoliberalism is often viewed as the cause of the crisis, for example due to the large-scale deregulation of the financial markets. The austerity measures that were implemented in response to the crisis, and the euro crisis in particular, are often interpreted as a continuation of neoliberalism. Where the EU Member States are offering little or no resistance to ongoing neoliberalisation, it is primarily the cities that have developed into the new centres of

resistance. This can be best illustrated using two examples which show that the city is both a site of resistance and a site of change.

The most visible examples of urban resistance to neoliberalism are the public protests that have taken place throughout Europe and the rest of the world since 2011. Inspired by the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, similar 'occupations' followed in Europe, for example the so-called *indignados* in Madrid's Puerta del Sol square or in Syntagma Square in Athens. Following the example of Occupy Wall Street as an expression of explicit resistance to neoliberalisation, similar demonstrations took place in numerous European cities. The protests are often sparked off by locally-specific problems or events, such as anger about high unemployment rates, austerity measures or reforms triggered by the euro crisis. Although there are significant differences between these different social protests, Marlies Glasius and Geoffrey Pleyers point out that they are all characterised by a general appeal to the values of democracy, social justice and dignity. Protesters will occupy a square or streets in the city as a way to reclaim those values. In so doing, they make use of a shared repertoire of practices and rituals, ranging from setting up temporary campsites, instituting democratic consultation forums and alternative ways of organising and sharing resources, promoting the platform on social media and using expressions of solidarity such as 'we are X', through to a wide range of creative and performative actions that give expression to the shared values. In other cases, such as the recent occupation of the University of Amsterdam, these techniques are used not as a way to reclaim public space, but instead public institutions.

With their emphasis on social justice, democracy and dignity, it makes sense that the best explanation for these social protests is that they are a response to neoliberalisation gone too far. The protesters are opposing a political zeitgeist that is dominated by market standards, and for this reason are trying to breathe new life into democratic decision-making processes. With their campsites and sharing economy, they are challenging a society that is dominated solely by the market. Where market standards

are robbing people of their dignity, activists try to reclaim it through peaceful and active protest. The many different creative expressions of protest, such as an *indignado* in Barcelona holding up a sign with the words *No som mercaderia en mans de politics banquer* ('We are not goods in the hands of politicians who work for the banks'), are often aimed at disturbing a political and policy discourse that is peppered with market terminology like 'competitiveness' and 'innovative growth'. Instead of making use of the traditional national political centres, the protesters are transforming their own squares and cities into a new 'polis' and political community in order to put up a barricade against the further undermining of politics and democracy by the market.

However, the city is not only a bulwark of resistance to neoliberalism, but also the site of experimentation with political change. Just as the protest movement itself is experimenting with alternative forms of consultation and organisation, cities, too, are more creative when it comes to finding new political solutions. For example, Madrid and Barcelona have elected (female!) mayors with roots in the *indignado* movement who are making the city into the first front for political innovation. It is also telling that it was the Amsterdam city council, rather than the national government, that passed a motion in July 2015 against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (better known as the TTIP) and the Investor-State Dispute Settlement instrument that forms part of this agreement (better known as ISDS), because these would once again render political power subordinate to the requirements of the market. It is cities that are experimenting with initiatives for sharing or participation economies, alternative approaches to combating poverty, employment policy and housing policy in order to lift them out of the influence of the market. In the absence of a new overarching ideology, the alternatives to neoliberalisation have to be developed on a small, local scale. This is why stakeholders within cities and institutions are trying to cast off the shackles of market forces and reclaim their own living environments.

For a long time, the city has been fertile, but also resistant, ground for neoliberalisation. I would therefore advise the Council not to harness the city's dynamism to rescale neoliberalisation, as the Urban Agenda is proposing. After the havoc wreaked by the euro crisis, Europe needs – above all – cosmopolitan cities that are doing the opposite, and are instead contributing to the regeneration of democracy, social justice and dignity.

The author

P.W. (Peter-Wim) Zuidhof is assistant professor in European Political Economy, Department of European Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam.

Further reading

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