



Viewpoint

Debating contemporary urban conflicts: A survey of selected scholars

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ABSTRACT

This survey presents the results of a questionnaire sent to a list of key scholars and professionals in fields related to urban processes and planning – town planning, geography, sociology, architecture and anthropology. The survey raised four simple, straightforward questions. What are the most pressing conflicts with regard to contemporary cities? What are the main fields of action for solving them? How can your discipline contribute with respect to this task? Could you mention an intervention that could serve as an example of that line of work? The response represents a plural and multidisciplinary perspective on contemporary urban issues from which a series of research and intervention perspectives emerges.

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Introduction

Perhaps one of the most effective ways to measure the pulse, aspirations and scope of scientific work is to analyze the questions it raises. Given the bases of urbanism and planning in applied knowledge and their goals of resolving specific, material problems, that analysis could be extended to identify and examine the contradictions our efforts target. How do disciplines oriented towards analyzing urbanization and territory model the object of their work (Batty, 2012; Beauregard, 2010; Pacione, 2005, pp. 22–42)? What processes do we term as ‘conflicts’ and why? What tools can we use to analyze those processes? How do our own scientific and political biases determine this perception, and how are those biases connected to everyday experience of those contradictions in the city? A brief examination of the enormous range of positions

and publications labeled as urban studies gives an idea of the richness and breadth of approaches to these theoretical, empirical and technical questions (Davies & Imbroscio, 2010; Hubbard, 2006, pp. 9–58; Paddison, 2001). However, to what extent does that diversity contribute to effectively dealing with and resolving the conflicts that give rise to it? In other words, does the proliferation and increasing prominence of urban studies point to progress in the order of knowledge *and* practice or, on the contrary, does it lead to a dispersion of modes of understanding, which, instead of helping us pinpoint and deal with the contradictions of urbanization, make them difficult to identify and define? This convergence of doubts led to the collective idea of preparing an international questionnaire to explore the opinions of a significant group of thinkers in a number of disciplines related to the city and to the analysis and government of their processes.

Even though a great deal of research in the field of urban studies is devoted to analyzing specific conflicts in particular cities and processes, the lack of a general and systematic approach to this issue is significant and, perhaps, reveals the inner constitution – and shortcomings – of the discipline. Moreover, the most ambitious attempts to address the topic often focus on aspects that are presented as an excess or alteration of the ‘normal’ urban order, as instabilities or deviations from the supposed state of territorial, economic or environmental balance. Of course, phenomena such as social (e.g., see Le Galès, 2002; Urban Studies, 2010) or political (e.g., see Bollens, 2000; Flint, 2006) conflicts – often involving violence or crime (e.g., Bertho, 2009; McClain, 2001; Winton, 2004) – and the urban nexus of the environmental crisis (e.g., see the special issues of Cities, 1996, 2011) or economic decline (e.g., Glaeser & Gyourko, 2005; Sugrue, 2005) have often monopolized researchers’ interests. It is, nevertheless, much more difficult to

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¹ Respondents: Adrian Atkinson (Technische Universität Berlin, DUP Associates), Pedro Bannen (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile), Robert Beauregard (Columbia University), Mike Davis (University of California), Simin Davoudi (Newcastle University), Manuel Delgado (Universitat de Barcelona), Jean-Pierre Garnier (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris), Kanishka Goonewardena (University of Toronto), Mark Gottdiener (University at Buffalo), Peter Hall (University College London), Gita Kewalramani (University of Mumbai), Rob Krier (KK Gesellschaft von Architekten mbH), Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich), Luigi Mazza (Politecnico di Milano), Alberto Mioni (Politecnico di Milano), Alain Musset (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris), Zaida Muxí (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya), Michael Pacione (University of Strathclyde), Nuno Portas (Universidade do Porto), Ivor Samuels (University of Birmingham), Saskia Sassen (Columbia University), Jianfa Shen (The Chinese University of Hong Kong), Michael Sorkin (The City University of New York), Max Welch Guerra (Bauhaus Universität Weimar), Sharon Zukin (The City University of New York).

find contributions articulating these particular conflicts or to attempt to trace their common ground in order to obtain a wider, systemic picture of the connections and synergies between the multiple layers of urban conflict (e.g., see Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Meanwhile, the focus on 'exceptional' imbalances in the urban order hinders the identification and understanding of the variegated context of micro-conflicts embedded in everyday urban life, an archipelago of contradictions that, indeed, denies the supposed harmony of 'normal' urban regimes – a wider map of conflicts that should invite us to reconsider the politics of urban studies and to reassess their role and project.

The following pages are the result of that endeavor. They present responses given by the academics and professionals consulted regarding four questions that are seemingly simple but are really quite challenging to answer:

1. Although all urban formations are, in themselves, a network of contradictions – which vary considerably depending on their locations and social and political contexts – what in your opinion is the most pressing conflict involving contemporary cities, one that most deserves investigation or to which you personally have devoted your greatest energy?
2. What are the main fields of action for solving this conflict, and which channels should be used to direct those efforts?
3. How can your discipline contribute with respect to this task?
4. Could you mention a policy, program, plan or even a theoretical intervention that could serve as an example of that line of work?

Although these may appear to be innocent questions – as is in fact suggested by several of the authors taking part in the survey – they are important in theoretical, practical, scientific and political terms. Crucially, I believe that the formulation of those questions in such basic terms may be an opportunity for finding common ground in a range of disciplines that take urban issues as their object of concern – i.e., for rethinking a space of cooperation that, as some of the contributors suggest, has long become a *terrain vague*, somewhere between the fronts of the academic trench war waged during the last few decades. Unfortunately, despite the habitual and mechanical allusions to multidisciplinary, the tendency towards scientific hyper-specialization and the magnificent capacity for sophisticating our discourses takes us further not only from the response to these generic approaches but also further from the mere wish to formulate them and collaborate in resolving them (INURA (International Network for Urban Research & Action), 2003). It appears clear that as university departments prosper and proliferate under these academic trends, civil society will eventually stand to lose. We hope that this survey will contribute to reopening the debate about these simple but urgent issues.

Those responding to the questionnaire include a diverse group of relevant thinkers in their respective fields and contexts. Here, urbanists and planners share space with sociologists, architects, geographers and anthropologists, specialists in areas that we consider essential for the integral and reflective comprehension of urban processes. No doubt there will be other disciplines that claim to take part in this debate, and in this sense, we hope this will be merely a first step in opening up the arena to new contributions. However, if every selection has its shortcomings, we think it essential to carry out an exercise of self-criticism and mention two whose structural nature renders them particularly obvious. In an academic environment aware of feminist and post-colonial perspectives, it is difficult to defend the legitimacy of a sample in which women and participants from the Global South continue to be in the minority. Without doubt, the final result would be much more complex if more voices from both these segments had been included. The list initially proposed was practically

gender-balanced, with a much higher proportion of candidates from the Global South. However, on many occasions contact with candidates could not be made. This shortcoming could serve as an invitation to continue the dialogue by means of new contributions that would complete, diversify or even refute the opinions expressed herein.

Readers will find four responses from each participant. These responses take a heterogeneous form in terms of extension and depth. Some authors asked to illustrate their texts with images, proposing that such illustrations would contribute to the synthetic transmission of their opinions, in particular, with respect to solutions to the problems posed. On some occasions, the persons interviewed preferred to use a different structure, by giving general responses, or to transmit their opinions under a global heading or title. Finally, one participant refused to respond to a specific question, an attitude that clearly indicated a critical stance with regard to the nature of the question or possible responses.

Responses

Adrian Atkinson, Technische Universität Berlin, DUP Associates

1. Intensive engagement of the world's population with immediate concerns in an ever faster-moving consumerist world has obscured meaningful thought about the future in the minds of urban planners, activists and theorists. The current crisis means economic crisis with, apparently, almost nobody prepared to accept its origin; hence, there is no meaningful search for deeper resolutions. There is talk and talk about 'global warming,' but no meaningful policies or action to deal with it are, however, in view. In reality, the only practical way to stem runaway global warming is to reduce and soon stop burning fossil fuel. This seems to be unthinkable because our whole world depends entirely on increasing consumption of fossil fuel. And yet it is now almost universally recognized that we are approaching the limits of the exploitation of fossil fuel and that 'peak oil' is upon us. This is good news from the point of view of global warming because we will be forced to use less fossil fuel. However, in the light of the coming decline in energy resources, the present 'economic crisis' is but a shadow of things to come.
2. In the coming decades, we will see the era of cities disappear. If there were in any way recognition of what is to come (and, in terms of the response to curb global warming, what *should* be done), then planning would come back into its own from the situation today where it has been pushed into the background; we are merely reacting to immediate developments. We need to think strategically again about what to do with the reorganization of the spatial distribution and morphology of settlements. Why? Because the decline in energy means the collapse of the global economy in the coming decades and the return of production – and lifestyles – to the local scale. It means the unviability (unsustainability) of large cities with populations emptying out in search of food and work, and with this the necessity of rebuilding local economies as the flow of food and manufactured goods from the other side of the world withers away. So, even before launching new strategies in planning, we need to think about how to bring food production back to cities and their sub-regions (urban and peri-urban agriculture – UPA) and, thence, developing coherent initiatives to revive variegated local economies that do not just sell goods produced in other places, but actually produce things locally again through participatory Local Economic Development (LED).

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