



Smart cities: Utopia or neoliberal ideology?



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Smart city

Utopia

Ideology

Hermeneutics

Neoliberalism

ABSTRACT

This paper develops a critical understanding of the smart city by investigating the values and ideas that underpin this concept and how they are translated into practice. It suggests that, despite private companies and municipalities promoting the smart city as a revolutionary utopia, this utopia is, on the contrary, an expression of the neoliberal ideology. The case study of the Italian city of Genoa shows that the smart city utopia acts as a generator of a collective imaginary while promoting the interests of business elites and diverting the attention away from urgent urban problems, such as urbanization. The neoliberal ideology influences the framing of these problems by favoring business-led technological solutions rather than political and long-term urban planning. The study suggests that this business-led utopia has important implications in terms of accountability of the actors involved.

1. Introduction

There is a high level of agreement in the literature that there is as yet no common definition of a smart city (Angelidou, 2014; Baron, 2012; Caragliu, Del Bo, & Nijkamp, 2011; Cocchia, 2014; Neirrotti, De Marco, Cagliano, Mangano, & Scorrano, 2014). The increasing diffusion of models, standards, and definitions of smart city creates ambiguity and makes it difficult to estimate to what extent the existing smart cities keep up with the expectations and the ideals claimed by the promoters of this paradigm (Anthopoulos, 2016).

Overall, the IT dimension appears central to the smart city (Carvalho, 2015; Mora, Bolici, & Deakin, 2017) and the advocates of this urban paradigm highlight the benefits resulting from the adoption of technologies, techniques and visions, granting that these are “scientific, objective, commonsensical and apolitical” in nature (Kitchin, 2015, 132). According to IBM (2011, 2), a smart city is an “interconnected, instrumented and intelligent” city. The “smartness” of a city seems related to its capability of providing infrastructures and services that improve the lives of its citizens (Cretu, 2012). Pamula, Gontar, and Gontar (2013) define the smart city as a solution to problems such as aging of social infrastructure, CO2 emissions, and urbanization. Meijer and Bolívar (2016) identify three constitutive elements of the smart city: smart technology, smart people, and smart collaboration.

A growing critical literature has countered these optimistic rhetoric and largely celebratory tones (Hollands, 2015, 2008; Greenfield, 2013; Vanolo, 2014; Kitchin, 2015; Marvin, Luque-Ayala, & McFarlane, C. (Eds.), 2015). Adopting a critical standpoint, this literature has

analysed the smart city as an expression of a neoliberal and market-led restructuring process of the urban space (Brenner & Theodore, 2002a, 2002b; Hollands, 2008; Peck & Tickell, 2002). The diffusion of new models of local governance based upon privatization and public–private partnerships, the exposure of municipalities to global competition, and the mobilization of an entrepreneurial ethos and discourse are among the most important traits of this “neoliberalization” process (Brenner & Theodore, 2002b, 353). The literature has raised concerns about the growing role of private corporations in defining and making up the smart city, thus alternately labelling the smart city as a “corporate smart city” (Hollands, 2015, 2), a “private city” (Adams, 2010, 6), and an “entrepreneurial city” (Harvey, 1989). Critical studies suggest that this business-driven development of smart city might result in a prioritization of business goals over social and economic ones, thus leading to social polarization and inequality (Brenner & Theodore, 2002b; Hollands, 2008).

In line with previous studies (Ahvenniemi, Huovila, Pinto-Seppä, & Airaksinen, 2017; Angelidou, 2015; Anthopoulos, 2016; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016), this paper tries to clarify the characteristics and ideas underpinning the smart city vision, with the belief that more critical reflection on the topic is needed (Marvin et al., 2015). The paper suggests that, despite private corporations and cities promoting the smart city as a revolutionary utopia, this paradigm is an expression of the neoliberal ideology. By developing a brief case study of Genoa, this study tries to support the theoretical points with empirical evidence – thus addressing a shortcoming of the critical literature, which requires more engagement with empirical research (Kitchin, 2015).

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The paper is logically structured in five sections, with the next section (Section 2) explaining the main concepts of our critical discourse (utopia and ideology) and contextualizing them within the ongoing debate on smart cities. Section 3 provides insights into the critical hermeneutics methodology adopted. Section 4 provides a brief case analysis of the smart city of Genoa, and Section 5 presents our conclusions.

2. Utopia and the neoliberal ideology

The word utopia is from the Greek οὐ (“not”) and τόπος (“place”), and it refers to an imaginary perfect place. The book of Deuteronomy offers a prime example of the symbolic power of this conceptual construct. The book narrates that God did not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land; the prophet could only see it from a distance. The description of the Promised Land recalls the Garden of Eden and the apocalyptic vision: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (Revelation 21:1). The Promised Land is described as the direction, the *telos* in the form of future/place to which humanity should strive and aspire. The act of seeing symbolizes an overcoming of space and time, the imagination of a world alternative to the existent. Utopia refers to this imaginary capacity that guides human actions and aspirations.

In 1516, a book by Sir Thomas More uses the term utopia to describe an ideal island in which legal, political, and economic systems allowed its community to live in harmony and in peace. Since then, the term utopia has been used to describe an imaginary project alternative to the existing social order, an ideal model of society (Campanella, 1602). The description of the State offered by Plato in the *Republic* can be considered one of the first examples of utopia (Hertzler, 1923) in the sense of a practicable and desirable (δυνατὰτε και βέλτιστα) model. It is by virtue of this possibility and desirability, that utopia has a revolutionary power. In this sense, the Marxist E. Bloch (1995) distinguishes the “abstract utopia” from the “concrete utopia,” the latter referring to a project connected with reality that leads citizens forward into historical transformation and social revolution.

In recent decades, the concept of concrete utopia has been used to define the smart city initiatives (Söderström, Paasche, & Klausner, 2014; Wiig, 2015; Datta, 2015; Watson, 2014; Vanolo, 2016; Marvin et al., 2015; Anthopoulos, 2016). On one hand, the advocates of this paradigm (public, private, and not-for profit actors) describe the smart city as “a concrete utopia in an urban space at human scale” (Genoa Smart City Association, GSCA). It is common to read in newspapers slogans such as “welcome to the city of Utopia... in Florence, city of the digital Renaissance” (Ferrara, 2014) and “the notion of smart city has been attractive as a concrete utopia” (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2014). The reference to utopia is clearly stated: “The major point of contact with the idea of smart cities is however in the New Atlantis of Bacon [...] In this city, science is sovereign” (Fuggetta, 2012). The description of smart city as a “common vision that provides citizens, business, and institutions with a ‘high-level’ goal on which to base potential sacrifices” (ABB, 2012, 37) reveals the eschatological character of this utopia.

On the other hand, critical studies suggest that, when translated into practice, the smart city utopia often conflicts with its aspirations. Wiig (2015) explains that a disconnection exists between the smart city concept and the translation of public policies into practice. Thus, “techno-utopian smart city solutions” (Wiig, 2015, 260) might become rhetorical devices mobilized to divert the attention away from the real problems of the citizenry. In the same vein, Watson (2014) suggests that there is a sharp contrast between the image of African cities boosted by the smart city rhetoric and the actual conditions of the population, the results of these fantasies being instead increasing social inequalities and marginalization.

This paper argues that a dialectic exists between utopia and ideology due to the inner connection of utopia to “authority and

control” (Harvey, 2000, 163). The emergence of a utopia over alternative visions fixes a specific moral order (Harvey, 2000; Vanolo, 2014) and might lead to the transformation of utopia into ideology, the latter being an “imaginary transposition of the real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 1971). Ideology describes “a negative sense of illusory self-understanding which helps a dominant class to sustain and reproduce its power and control” (Nørreklit, Nørreklit, & Melander, 2006). Ideologies have a practical impact on daily life insofar as they produce a collective imaginary that reinforces existing systems of social domination while preventing the production of alternative imaginaries (Eagleton, 1996; Van Dijk, 1998). This paper suggests that the smart city utopia is a fundamental facet of the neoliberal contemporary ideology (Hackworth, 2007; Kornberger & Carter, 2010).

Neoliberalism is a macro-logical concept difficult to outline due to its hybrid character. Indeed, neoliberalism is never found in a pure form, but it is always mediated by the historical, economic, and social context in which it emerges (Peck, 2013). A contrast may then exist between neoliberal ideology and “actual existing neoliberalism” (Peck, 2013, 146). This paper focuses on the ways in which the assumptions underpinning the neoliberal ideology have influenced the formulation of the smart city utopia and its translation into practice.

Fostered in the political arena by Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s, neoliberalism makes its appearance in the field of city government with the proposal of market mechanisms and managerialism as solutions to urban problems (Harvey, 2005; Kornberger & Carter, 2010). In this specific setting, neoliberalization assumes the public “goodness” of privatization, lean government, and deregulation through the implementation of “competitive regimes of resource allocation” (Peck & Tickell, 2002, 394). The value of competitiveness and the related managerial tool of performance measurement play a fundamental role in the neoliberal ideology (Kornberger & Carter, 2010; Santangelo, 2016), thus becoming a constitutive element of the smart city utopia. Kornberger and Carter (2010) suggest that the diffusion of city rankings that measure the “smartness” of cities is an example of the disciplinary and normalizing power of neoliberalism to generate competition among cities by transforming their differences in deviances from a norm of smartness assumed to be the best practices. Another example is the Smart Cities Stakeholder Platform initiated by the European Commission (Smart City Project, 2013) which places the urban paradigm of smart city at the centre of European policies for the coming years. The availability of European financial resources earmarked for smart cities projects strongly impacts the allocation policies of cities hit by the economic crisis (Cocchia, 2014) and expose them to international competition.

This process of “neoliberalization of the urban space” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002b) has also led to the diffusion of “networked” forms of governance based upon public-private partnerships; ‘new public management’ strategies; privatization and competitive contracting of municipal services” (Guarneros-Meza & Geddes, 2010, 116). A key idea of this neoliberal restructuring of the public sector is that governments are no longer called upon to govern, command, and control but to “steer” (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, 46). Accordingly, the underlying assumption of the smart city paradigm is that “solving societal problems is not merely a question of developing good policies but much more a managerial question of organizing strong collaboration between government and other stakeholders” (Meijer & Bolívar, 2016,3).

According to the critical scholars of the neoliberal ideology (Brenner & Theodore, 2002a; Guarneros-Meza & Geddes, 2010), there is an increasing concentration of urban power in the hands of a few political and business elites in European cities (Blanco, 2015, 124). The financial austerity measures imposed upon cities force them to rely more and more on private and local sources of revenue (Brenner & Theodore, 2002b). This results in the adoption of a profit-oriented approach and in an increasing involvement of private actors, holders of innovation and technological knowledge. This involvement

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