Urban social movements: from the 'right to the city' to transnational spatialities and flaneur activists
Lila Leontidou
Urban social movements: from the ‘right to the city’ to transnational spatialities and flaneur activists

Introduction

The nature of ‘urban social movements’ has changed immensely over a quarter of a century that has come to pass between two major events in Madrid: the Citizens’ Movement, introduced by Castells (1983) as an exemplar of the urban grassroots, and the peace demonstrations after the 2004 bomb in the central railroad station in Madrid (cf. Figure 1). The contrast between the squatters of Orcasitas in the late 1970s, on the one hand, and the international activists coining in Atocha during the mid-2000s to protest against terrorism, on the other, summarizes a lot of the major changes in urban social movements over three decades, which we wish to stress in this special feature. The following collection of papers originated at a session of the 7th International Conference on Urban History in 2004, and was enriched later with contributions by other scholars and activists around the journal City.

We will not spend much space on definitions—not the least because of their fluidity—except for reminding that post-war sociologists who were dissatisfied with studies on ‘urban structure’ or social structure more generally, shifted from the static stereotypes of social integration and order—vs.—anomie and the political sociology of organizations, toward conflictual identities of action and mobilization, and focused on social movements (Alexandropoulos, 2001). During the past millennium, the ‘right to the city’ was predominant as a demand. It was named by Lefebvre (1968) and analysed by Castells (1977, 1983), who grounded his theories on European societies after May 1968. With his adoption of a comparative perspective between cities of the South of America and of Europe, Castells constructed one of the few theories within urban studies, which did not reproduce Anglo-American experiences and models and was sensitive to cultural and political particularities of the South (Leontidou, 1990/2006).

Now the bibliography has grown, times have changed, and so have urban social movements. Although the anti-global movement has prepared a Charter for the ‘Right to the City’, presented by Portaliou, changes can be vividly portrayed if we venture to paraphrase Pickvance’s title (2003) into ‘From urban social movements to social movements’, in order to stress the decline of interest in urban social movements recently. The debate has taken two diverse paths toward more ‘fashionable’ concerns: (1) the ‘globalization’ discourse, within which urban social movements appear somewhat parochial (Hamel et al., 2000) on the face of transnational spatialities—except where they are defined very broadly as movements taking...
place within the city, or as movements concerned with urban ecology as a case of global environmental change; and (2) a heavy emphasis on organization theory, especially the ‘third sector’ of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and voluntary organizations in general (Pickvance, 2003; Davis et al., 2005), as well as those fashionable concepts of ‘social capital’, ‘political opportunity structures’ and the like (Mayer, 2003). This emphasis, also found here in two of the papers, marginalizes ‘spontaneous’ urban social movements in favour of more organized associations and creates a necessity for a new round of exploration of the former.

This special feature of City proposes to hold on to the urban and the grassroots, by investigating several special niches of civil society posing urban demands within cities and combining this with the emergent research agenda on social movements. Most of the papers highlight a set of transformations and coincidences between old and new urban social movements. As all collections, this one is eclectic, in the tradition of Castells (1983), for example, who defined urban social movements on the basis of evidence from Spain, France and Latin America—that is, from countries with Mediterranean shores or Latin cultural roots—with few sideways glances at the gay community of San Francisco, which is still always quite visible in relevant research (Davis et al., 2005). The following collection focuses on societies of Western and Southern Europe with a sideways glance at Latin America, but also a major gap on the case of Eastern Europe, because urban social movements there,
before and after the fall of bipolarity, seem to belong in a different logic and process (Pickvance, 2003). Papers included here focus on capitalist societies in order to examine both urban social movements on the ‘right to the city’ reflected in squatting, and changes during the present millennium of globalization and the ‘digital revolution’ reflected in transnational alternative cultures and the circulation of flaneur activists.

Cities, protest and insurrections

Long before they were named by Castells, Pickvance, and then a host of other authors, ‘urban social movements’ have originated in popular uprisings and insurrections. The Chicago ecologists stressed their importance (Park et al., 1967; Alexandropoulos, 2001) and cities nurtured insurrections since the times of the ‘city’ mob and bread riots (Hobsbawm, 1959), or the Communidades de Castilla in the 1520s (Castells, 1983). Long before sociologists took the stage, various cities in different epochs have turned to symbols of resistance, with ‘urban’ uprisings which shook the world. Paris, the rebellious city par excellence, took the stage in 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871 (Castells, 1983; Harvey, 2003) and further in 1944, 1968 (Lefebvre, 1968), 2005 and 2006—to name only the most memorable dates of rebellions and revolutions. Spatial coincidence repeated itself in the most amazing manner: the city barricades of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the French May of ’68, rose exactly in the same places: it was in Boulevard St Germain in May 1871 that Raoul Rigaut fought and was killed by the Versaillais. In May 1968, a little bit to the South, around Sorbonne and in Rue Gay Lussac and Rue Soufflot, street fighting was raging. Between those turbulent times, in 1944 in Quartier Latin again, barricades against the Germans were placed (Hobsbawm, 1968). At present, in March and April 2006, Sorbonne and Quartier Latin have hosted activists from throughout France, who marched from Avenue Raspaille until Place de la Nation and experienced violent conflicts with the police in the Place des Invalides. Demands for the ‘right to the city’ were underplayed in favour of the ‘right to employment’, but these were movements against authority in the city, typical of urban social movements.

The importance of the cityscape for urban mobilizations is thus strongly put forward by Paris. It is rather certain that people have mobilized spontaneously in the longue duree, without a strategy for re-use of avenues and squares of earlier revolutions, forgetting earlier locations of insurrections. By contrast, planners and governments do not forget. They keep using planning as a means of crowds’ control. Still today, campuses are planned away from the heart of the city and people are rehoused from the inner city in the tradition of Haussmann, who decentralized poverty and discontent by rebuilding central Paris between the 1848 and 1871 insurrections, in order to surround the Arc de Triomphe by monumental boulevards (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2003). In the same direction of so-called ‘Haussmannization’, other cities were ‘renewed’. Vienna’s Ringstrasse segregated various urban rings (Schorske, 1981). Mussolini flattened the hills of Rome to monumentalize its centre and uproot dwellers of barriche away from it (Fried, 1973). However, Haussmann failed already in his time (Lefebvre, 1968); and in our times, it is quite ironic that one of the most momentous and influential French uprisings, the ‘NO’ against the EU Constitutional Treaty in May 2005, was celebrated with dances around Bastille but also the Arc de Triomphe, and so was the victory of the protest movement against employment legislation, in April 2006. Haussmann in fact provided a perfect urban design for massive demonstrations.

Berlin, the city which has become the symbol of the end of bipolarity, hosted one of the most memorable moments of popular mobilization during one of Europe’s major political turning points. The Berlin wall, this evocative symbol of the cold war, was demolished in a global moment fixed in urban
space, which exploded on 9 November 1989 with cultural activities hosted by Berlin but addressed to the world. The city was lively with art and concerts by Pink Floyd and their ‘Wall’, the Scorpions with ‘Winds of Change’ and Mstislav Rostropovich with his cello facing the ruins of the wall. The city was the major protagonist of this overwhelming urban movement against the cold war but also against divided cities, which also magnetized activists from around Europe. Cities and music reappeared as protagonists in urban concerts aimed at protest against poverty, war and neo-liberal globalization. The most recent one was a five-city concert (London, New York, Tokyo, Berlin, Paris) on 3 July 2005 with the motto ‘Make Poverty History’, massively attended and broadcast on TV around the globe. The event centred on Hyde Park in London, the city which has staged the most massive anti-war rallies throughout the new millennium. However, it was ironically undermined by violence four days later, by the terrorist bombings in the London transport system. Terrorists, however, failed to keep people off the streets, the buses and the ‘tube’, and have not silenced transnational rallies, peace marches, anti-war rallies, which are evidence of transnational urban social movements emerging in European cities and elsewhere in the world.

Claiming the city

There are still strong popular spontaneous urban social movements demanding a right to the city in the form of material possessions, housing and land in particular. Throughout the 20th century, with varying intensities, from the ‘renovation-deportation’ movement in Paris opposing planned gentrification and residential squatters in London and Amsterdam, to suburban popular squatting in many Southern cities, people have been claiming the city. The squatting movement in urban cores and downgraded industrial spaces of Northern Europe differs profoundly from popular squatting on peripheral land in the cities of the South. The former has extended from the occupation of unused buildings for residential purposes since the 1970s, analysed by Kavoulakos for the case of Germany, to ‘social centres’ at present in deindustrializing cores of Italian cities, as Montagna analyses, as well as British cities highlighted by Chatterton and Hodkinson.

In the South, many people have been ‘voting with their feet’ to follow massive migration waves away from the poor and insecure countryside. Fast urbanization and the colonization of urban space has turned into an urban social movement against authority for the control (and colonization) of peripheral urban land, which is still unthinkable in the Anglo-American city. This has been explored as a spontaneous subordinate culture and a massive urban social movement defying the state and contravening its planning regulations (Castells, 1977; Leontidou, 1990/2006). Despite the later co-optation of popular illegal building—by ‘legalizations’ or by self-help projects or by the creation of popular housing estates—squatting still goes on in several urban corners of Europe and Latin America. In this collection, it is focused upon by Beja Horta for Portugal, and Souza for the notorious favelas of Brazilian cities, who basically highlights the role of planning in Latin America, as discussed in the final part of our introduction. Beja Horta’s study of immigrants in the squatter settlements of Lisbon addresses an important moment in the history of South European urban social movements in general. Squatting on the urban periphery is still massive in Portugal, but it has also never been completely eradicated in Spain, Italy and Greece, despite the loss of its massive nature and its popular character after South European EU accession (1981–1986).

Intellectual discussions about popular mobilization, organizations, parties and spontaneity in the South are punctuated by important figures. Italian radical intellectuals as influential as the two Antonios—Gramsci
and Negri—have inspired relevant discussions. Gramsci (1971) has been rediscovered earlier as an invaluable source of fresh theoretical reflections in urban studies (Leontidou, 1990/2006). His couplets of civil society/state, spontaneity/conscious leadership, dominant/subaltern groups and cultures, urbanism/anti-urbanism, but especially his departure from grand narratives, have led to a better understanding of the Mediterranean city in contrast with Northern modernism (Leontidou, 1996). One of his most interesting couplets—the antithesis between spontaneity and conscious leadership—has been directly related to the importance of spontaneous urban social movements in Mediterranean cities, which developed outside the orbit of any conscious leadership (Leontidou, 1990/2006). Negri’s work on the metropolis, on the other hand, as well as the Situationists’ interventions, are taken up in this special feature by Afouxenidis, with reference to Italy and Greece. Negri restores the vision of a unitary political culture of resistance in the metropolis (mass), capable of regenerating it, in opposition to the unending fragmentation of identities posited by postmodernists. Afouxenidis critically discusses his approach, comparing politics of democratization and cultures of clientelism in Italian and Greek cities, and presenting the political context of ‘differentially intertwined’ cultures, a concept referring to crucial South European forms of flexibility creating symbiotic rather than conflicting cultures, which are rare in the core of Europe. He thus indicates that even within the context of Mediterranean collective cultures and urban social movements, there are important differences among societies and ways in which people organize and mobilize.

On the level of activism, urban Italy has also contributed the celebrated ‘social centres’ rooted in the Italian autonomist movement, founded in the mid-1970s but proliferating in the 1990s in Italy and more recently in the UK. Parallels to squatting and demands for the ‘right to the city’ can be discerned in the fact that ‘social centres’ are also sheltered in occupied unused buildings in deindustrializing cities of Western and Northern Europe. However, as Montagna demonstrates, the importance of ‘social centres’ is larger than the reappearance of urban illegal squatting in a new form and a revival of claims for urban space in traditional industrial cities. His case study, the ‘social centre’ of Rivolta in the industrial neighbourhood outside Venice, evolved from a ghettoized group to a central proactive actor by using the Italian political opportunities process. ‘Social centres’ in the case of the UK, presented by activist-scholars Chatterton and Hodkinson, are rooted in ‘autonomy clubs’ since the 1980s rather than squatting; some are rented and a few coop-owned. They were named ‘social centres’ very recently, while even at the turn of the millennium the term ‘squat cafes’ was also used. British activists encourage solidarity with migrant struggles through the No Borders network. Though problems of ghettoized groups and even gated communities are pointed out by Chatterton and Hodkinson, British ‘social centres’ are very aware of the perils of both enclosure and co-optation. In the broader field of urban social movements, we can claim that in fact ‘social centres’ link up the past (squatting and opposition to gentrification) with the present (and the future) of urban social movements, as self-managed creative workshops of transnational alternative cultures and civil disobedience, constructing the ‘social commons’.

Transnational networks and flâneur activists

The most important recent shift in collective cultures around urban social movements relates with the ‘digital revolution’ as well as the contested concept of ‘globalization’—aspatial globalization (Massey, 2005). It also relates with political developments such as the end of bipolarity in Europe. During the present millennium several environmental,
political, social and cultural movements have converged in anti-globalization rallies, which have escalated since those massive demonstrations against the World Trade Organization Summit in Seattle in 1999. Several transnational associations have emerged, opposing aggressive international economic integration and personifying ‘globalization’ as an adversary. What we will call flaneur activists are emerging: mobile people who travel from town to town in order to attend militant rallies. We are borrowing the concept of flaneur from W. Benjamin (1983, 1999) who is, in turn, inspired by Baudelaire—a Parisian urban poet—and we propose to use it for activists who roam the world as members of the World Forum or the European Social Forum and constantly reassemble in various cities around the globe. Their cosmopolitanism points to relative affluence in comparison to urban poverty prevalent in earlier movements, but they, too, are involved in invariably urban mobilizations, held by urbanites who are not necessarily inhabitants of the city in question.

Millions of people have mobilized against globalization. As the activist-scholar Portaliou demonstrates in her concise critique of neo-liberalism, their platforms are concerned with privatization, NATO wars, US aggression and their global impact, poverty and the exercise of economic power by the few, but also global environmental change and its local impacts. The global Social Forum has been always held in Porto Alegre, as Souza mentions, while the European Social Forum has reassembled in several alternate world cities against several Summits of the rich and the powerful, the G8 and the leaders of Europe: cities such as Seville, Barcelona, Genoa, Thessaloniki have become stages of protest and anti-globalization rallies of the European Social Forum and other collectivities, as Portaliou narrates. More recently, global terrorism is also seen as an opponent, as urban mobilizations in Madrid and London underline.

Flaneur activists can mobilize via the Internet in split seconds and organize massive anti-globalization rallies with participants from all over the globe. In fact, these activists emerged during the 1990s but spread with the generalization of wireless communications. The Internet and even more the mobile phone are in the hands of everybody in the first technological revolution ever, which involves such large masses of people. The digital society itself has given birth to global cyber-cultures, directed to several disparate targets. In this context, hacktivists (hackers and activists) and indeed a number of other cyber-groups, find their hideaways in what Papadimitriou names ‘Notopia’ (no-topos, no-place, no-location, no maps): an unmappable area of the Internet, endowed with a distinct Notopiac topology, which makes cityscapes fade. Hacktivists become virtual personalities via the Internet, or may remain local activists who mobilize their discursive resources and seek media visibility in order to generate support, as well as resisting material realities with actions. It is doubtful, however, whether their individualistic practices can qualify as social movements. The Internet is only a tool and method of communication, used by both progressive and conservative, or in fact reactionary, political subjects. It may occasionally lead to collectivities against authority, that is, to urban social movements, as, for example, when cyber-groups are sheltered in ‘social centres’ in order to provide resources for activism—though Chatterton and Hodkinson do not refer to such groups.

The antipode is, of course, a large mass of computer-illiterate people, especially on the periphery. Civic engagement of the young flaneurs, who are footloose, can afford to travel and in fact wander and mobilize in the transnational rallies, creates a striking contrast with urban movements of the poor and immobile working class and the cityward migrants of the past millennium. Migrants, for example, had moved to the city in order to stay, and demanded a ‘right to the city’. This is how Castells’ (1996) distinction between ‘tribes’ and ‘flows’ emerged. However, in an era where even the unemployed of the Paris banlieu in November
would communicate electronically through Internet and mobile phones, and would move to the heart of the city as soon as student uprisings emerged there, in spring 2006, Castells’ couplet is deconstructed: his ‘tribes’—residents and community activists—fade away in the digital society of our days.

This has an important impact on definitions which have branded ‘urban’ as parochial movements for ‘local’ issues. As underlined by the experience of ‘social centres’, transnational and local movements merge, overlap and coincide in the city. The new urban social movements are simultaneously global and local movements, where the ‘global’ pole is strongly put forward by anti-globalization rallies and their ‘local’ pole is also mediated by the city: ‘social centres’ shelter transnational networks in locally occupied buildings. They claim unused spaces and upgrade them, so they are really ‘urban’ social movements, despite cases when local societies do not welcome these activists, presented by Chatterton and Hodkinson. In general, urban social movements in the new millennium shift from immobility to movement as the flaneur activist emerges, but also reproduce islands of community activism in the popular suburbs of Southern cities or in the deindustrializing cityscapes of the North.

Planning, co-optation and discursive resistance

Questions of autonomy and vulnerability of urban social movements are the most contested ones in the literature, and are recurring in all contributions in this issue. The state has always alternated co-optation—mostly in various forms of planning—and repression, in order to control popular independence and urban social movements. In Southern Europe, co-optation took the form of ‘top-down’ housing policy, ‘legalization’ without the provision of infrastructure and repression included the occasional demolitions of illegal houses (Leontidou, 1990/2006). Self-help housing and repression have been two faces of the same coin, as also shown by Beja Horta for Portugal and Souza for the cities of Latin America. In a focused analysis about the nature of urban planning from various political perspectives, Souza presents the traps of participation in planning and ‘self-help’, the established modes of integration of squatters in Southern cities. He then expands on the prospects of urban social movements in the Brazilian favelas as agents of participatory budgeting and extends this to a discussion of ‘grassroots urban planning’ and the limits of the partnership between the state and civil society in the recent processes of urban governance in Latin America.

Kavoulakos poses questions of the loss of autonomy and de-politicization in German cities, by indicating how the alternative or ‘third’ sector of movements and NGOs has been recuperated and integrated in order to substitute for the shrinking welfare state. The policy of subsidizing squatters in the case of Berlin has been combined with co-optation. Urban social movements have passed from isolation to recognition in order to immediately lose their autonomy and be captivated in the intricate bureaucratization process of neo-liberal Germany. Chancellor Kohl’s discursive co-optation consisted of a rhetoric about the grassroots, ‘bottom-up’ policy as a case of ‘subsidiarity’—in a very successful and indeed cunning valorization of a well-known Euro-word.

Such developments broaden Castells’ (1983) view that co-optation undermines success of urban social movements and his distrust of linkages with political parties. Pickvance (2003) contests Castells with a reference to the various types of co-optation possible in complex democratic regimes. And indeed this flexibility characterizes his own research field, the core of Europe, where radical change brought about by autonomous or spontaneous movements is less frequent than organized change originating in voluntary associations, NGOs and pressure groups.
(Davis et al., 2005). It is interesting to compare in this connection the liberal regimes of Western Europe which had developed strategies of co-optation, with centralism in France and dictatorship in Spain which Pickvance (2003) considers incapable of ‘soft’ responses like resource mobilization. The current focus on NGOs, notions of resource mobilization and political opportunity structure and process—as distinguished by Montagna—and the proverbial ‘social capital’ (Mayer, 2003), have originated especially in the core, where in fact grassroots urban social movements are marginalized as a theoretical and material spontaneous occurrence. In West European bibliography, ‘differentially intertwined’ cultures, as analysed by Afouxenidis, are out of focus. Informal popular mobilizations claiming the city—the ‘right to the city’—are underplayed in the North, in favour of more formal organizations dealing with human rights or GM foods. However, the matter is not one of theoretical preferences. It concerns historical variations of social formations and North/South contrasts.

The autonomy of urban movements can no longer be controlled solely within material resource mobilization. *Flaneur* activists, people who travel to various cities in order to join protest rallies, cannot be rehoused or planned away. Authorities turn to other means of surveillance, like cameras, and massively towards influencing public opinion by media broadcasts. In fact, public opinion is formed by *discursive* flows in international networks and the media on the global level. We already referred to the case of Germany. Beja Horta presents the example of discursive ghettoization as a main concern among popular squatter residents in Lisbon. The same type of indignation has been voiced elsewhere, by residents in peripheral Mediterranean communities. For example, metropolitan discursive prejudice originating in Paris has been a cause of concern among Corsicans. Their protest and related mobilizations reproduce familiar core/periphery antitheses: they reproduce *neo-colonial* spatialities in the periphery of *postcolonial* Europe (Leontidou et al., 2005). Their feeling of exclusion in the context of insularity, triggered by the media, has resulted in frequent mobilizations against the ‘core’ and often against tourists. Corsicans have been found to challenge Europeanization, identities and narratives therefrom, despite heavy funding of the island by the French state and the EU (Leontidou et al., 2005). Europeanization has been also challenged elsewhere in Europe (Garcia, 1993; Leontidou, 2004). Despite discursive flows to the contrary, it was sharply outvoted even by the French, founders of the EU, and then by the Dutch, in their referenda of May 2005 against the European Constitutional Treaty. Their resistance stresses the contested nature of discourses on European citizenship and identity in popular concerns.

It thus appears that the age of communications and its concomitant transnational public spheres, pull social movements towards *discursive resistance*: they challenge meanings, identity constructions and media stereotypes. Urban populations often contest media stereotyping, or stigmatization, of their ways of life or ethnic origin or their neighbourhoods. The city is a key node in order to communicate their own alternative narratives. Revolutionaries have always regarded cities as places of major impact of their uprisings, and have mobilized in the centre, seeking visibility. In our own times of transnational spatialities the same is true, whether it concerns terrorist strikes against New York, Madrid, London and elsewhere, protests against them, or media publicity and dissemination of riots and uprisings.

All these developments certainly differ from urban social movements as initially defined by Castells (1977). He stressed their involvement in the consumption process—in collective consumption—and their political effect or outcome. A little later, however, Castells (1983) broadened his scope, including civil rights movements, trade unionism and cultural resistance (see also Pickvance, 2003). Most urban social movements used to
relate with the *material reality* in the city and with spatially fixed groups: residents protesting against rehabilitation, renovation and gentrification, land use change and zoning, demanding infrastructure provision or collective consumption and squatting on land and in buildings. These indeed spurred urban movements in Europe, while in the South—European as well as Latin American—housing and land occupation featured more frequently and are still reproduced alongside transnational mobilizations.

Now, however, material realities have changed and metamorphoses have become apparent. This special feature focuses on essential passages and transformations of spatialities: from grassroots insurrections, squatting and opposition to renovation, to *flaneur* activists of transnational mobilizations; from land occupations to ‘social centres’; from community to social networks; from spontaneity to NGOs; and often from the local to the global. Although turning points are not absolute and both sides of all couplets may emerge simultaneously in different cities, research in the course of time has tended to marginalize the first sides of the above couplets and to merge research on movements with that on ‘political opportunity structures’ (or processes, as in Montagna), ‘social capital’ and organization theory (Davis *et al*., 2005), to the advantage of the latter. In addition, imaginations are captured by anti-globalization rallies and those contesting the issue of Europeanization and European citizenship, complicating it with questions of globalization, migration and identity construction. Could these be the extension of civil rights movements? Do environmental mobilizations in many ways broaden earlier demonstrations for the ‘right to the city’ and the colonization of urban space, as well as traditional movements against authority?

What we hope to show in this special feature, is that it is fruitful to place an emphasis back on comparative analysis of the ‘grassroots’ and spontaneous urban social movements, claiming the city, and more traditional forms of protest and disobedience, in order to understand movements by more organized agents and anti-global mobilizations of *flaneur* activists. Urban social movements now address broader issues, increasingly, as the EU expands and engulfs new members and as the world becomes interconnected. However, a closer reflection on cities in peripheral regions and nations, which are pushed to the foreground in this collection of papers, indicates the coexistence of old and new forms of movements, spatialities, types of mobilization and organization.

**Note**

1 Articles are based on papers dealing with the 20th century, which were selected by the Session Convenor, Professor Lila Leontidou, among papers of the session ‘Urban social movements for shelter and the environment: a comparison among cities across European space and time’. The Session took place in the context of the 7th Annual International Conference on Urban History by the European Association of Urban Historians in Athens, 27–30 October 2004.

2 For this paper by Eleni Portaliou, ‘Anti-global Movements Reclaim the City’, see our next issue, 11:1.

**References**


Lila Leontidou is Professor at the Hellenic Open University, Greece.
E-mail: Leontidou@eap.gr