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Urban Dynamics and Urban Sustainability: An Impossible Marriage or a Marriage of Convenience?

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Abstract

Dealing with both urban dynamics and urban sustainability can appear as a paradox insofar as these terms seem radically opposed. But, obviously, thanks to the dynamics they created and from which they gained advantage, cities have been sustainable since they first appeared. This paper will demonstrate that it is no use trying to oppose dynamics and sustainability inasmuch as sustainability appears as the contemporary form of dynamics. Taking this major evolution in urban history into consideration will first enlighten the present context which promotes such innovations, then define the new kind of cities that are about to be produced. Last, it will focus on an epistemological reflection upon the social sciences and their ability to provide tools to analyse and explain what currently occurs in cities.

Introduction

Ordinary discourse usually opposes *dynamics* and *sustainability*, as if these two words were radically opposed: dynamics means what is *moving* (such as social relations, trade, cultural exchanges, etc), whereas *sustainability* deals with what is *fixed, unchanging and immutable*. Currently, the world is changing very quickly and one of the solutions to cope with the negative effects of this evolution is to try to fix everything and to stabilize the world as it was *before*.

In this paper, I would like to question the relations between *dynamics* and *sustainability* by wondering whether it is relevant (or not) to oppose them insofar as *sustainability* appears as the current form of *dynamics*. To answer this question, following the main topic of the conference, I will only focus on cities, which reveal the paradox of this false opposition. Indeed, cities have existed for a long time and they have kept growing and developing since that time, thanks to the various dynamics that historians or geographers have described. Today, to cope with huge changes, such as demographic growth, urban sprawl, globalization, etc. sustainability appears as the solution to improve the quality of the urban way of life.

I would like to demonstrate that sustainability is the current form of dynamics. So, I will first underline the fact that cities have always been dynamic and there is no use in trying to imagine a city without dynamics. Then, I will question the concept of *sustainable cities* as it emerges in connection with political and social demands. Last, I will question our social sciences disciplines: are they effective in analysing *sustainable cities*, this new object we are dealing with today?

1. Nothing is more sustainable than a city. Nothing is more dynamic than a city

In this first part of my paper, I would like to demonstrate that is no use trying to oppose dynamics and sustainability insofar as cities have always been being sustainable.

1.1 Dynamics have ensured the continued existence of cities.

Cities are long term objects. Indeed, depending on the civilization, cities have a long-standing existence. The Western-European urban framework stems from the Roman Empire. The Spanish and Portuguese conquerors founded numerous cities all over the world which still exist today. In China, cities were founded several millennia ago. Most of these cities still exist, and some of them have become some of the biggest in the world, such as Mexico City or Manila. The 21st century is an urban one insofar as urbanization is the most importance mutation of our contemporary world. We can observe simultaneously the development cities of all-sizes and the diffusion of an urban way of living. Indeed, today, more than half of the world population lives in cities, and, according to Michel Lussault (Lussault, 2007), the world is now urban, *i.e.* the urban way of life has spread all over the world: even if people do not live in cities, their way of living is totally urban. The city is no longer specific to each civilisation: it is now a global object which has diffused everywhere. How to explain this success story? We can assume it is due to a variety of different dynamics, equally the dynamics of urban societies as well as the dynamics of the cities themselves.

1.2 Dynamics of the urban societies

Dynamics are at the heart and at the origin of the urban project. According to Jacques Lévy (Lévy, 1999 ; Lévy & Lussault, 2003), founding a city is a “geographical act”: that means that people have an interest in living nearby in order to benefit from all the activities and functions produced by the cities, *i.e.* their dynamics. Lévy goes on to write that the city is made up of diversity and density: diversity of activities, people, services, amenities, and density of all these things. A city is a sort of gamble: people gamble that they will benefit from the co-presence of all this diversity and therefore move to the city.

Cities appear as the place where various innovations have been created, such as political organisation (Athens), urbanism and urban planning (Rome during the Renaissance), modern trade or international relationships (Venice). Cities are a melting pot of innovation where intellectuals have always been inventing a new way of living all together. Today, cities still have this very important cultural function: they harbour the arts and entertainment of course, but also science and research. So, cities stem from all these kinds of dynamics; but they in turn project these dynamics outside the city.

1.3 Dynamics of cities

Social dynamics due to the co-presence of various inhabitants composing an urban society have geographical effects, insofar as they lead to dynamics that spatially affect cities and their environment. This environment tends today to encompass the whole world: the history of cities reveals this general process. The main mechanism explaining this influence is the accumulation of capital (economic of course, but also political, cultural...) and its redistribution all around.

Various authors (such as geographers, sociologists or historians) have demonstrated that cities, ever since they were founded, have been organizing the space surrounding them (Von Thünen) or an area they tend to polarize (Weber, Christaller). At the origin of these phenomena stands the process of capital accumulation: Braudel then Immanuel Wallerstein were the first to explain the fact that cities are the hubs of the world-system and that cities organize it. And according to Saskia Sassen (Sassen, 2001), cities and especially global cities (*i.e.* London, New York and Tokyo) are motors of the current globalisation: these cities concentrate wealth, skills, political and economic power, *etc.*

2. The emergence of the *sustainable city*

So, taking into account the fact that cities have always been sustainable, we have to analyse the current situation, which promotes the “sustainable city” as a political requirement all over the world. What is this *sustainable city* that people have to build all together? What does it look like? I want to assume in this second part of my paper that *sustainability* is the continuation of dynamics by other means.

2.1 From cities to urban monsters

The dynamics I have just described have taken a very long time to occur. The processes have been going faster during the second part of the 20th century. The face of cities has deeply evolved since 1950s: we can assume that cities have to face with systemic crisis due to the acceleration of their own dynamics, especially demographic growth. Urban population has regularly grown because of demographic transition (especially in emerging countries) and rural exodus. Cities become bigger and bigger sometimes exceeding 10, 20 or even 30 million inhabitants (Tokyo: 47 million; NYC: 26 million; Mexico: 23 million; Manila: 20 million; Shanghai: 18 million).

This augmentation of population leads to various problems that could make cities hellish and that authorities have to cope with. Even if the situation is different between developed and emerging country countries, the concentration of population has the same consequences everywhere. How to solve the issue of concentrating people? Two solutions exist to settle this issue. On the one hand, urban sprawl which leads to peri-urbanisation, and on the other hand, densification which leads to vertical urbanisation. These two processes bring about a major issue for the political authorities of these cities. First, how to cope with the social and spatial fragmentation that is the consequence of densification or urban sprawl? Then, how to administer cities that change so fast?

Moreover, the increase of population and the densification of all kinds of networks have environmental consequences within cities: recycling waste, pollution, water, transportation, green spaces... All these issues which are not only relevant to questions of quality of life are also crucial in dealing with sanitary and social problems.

So, the current urban crisis has various dimensions: social (due to social and spatial fragmentation), political (lack of governance) and environmental (decrease of quality of life). Cities seem to have reached a point of no return. Social demand mainly focuses on the environmental issue, but this demand also reveals the deep inequalities of urban societies. Indeed, whereas spatial justice is a field of research that has been studied by various geographers directly inspired by the philosopher John Rawls, some scientists are exploring a

new field: environmental justice whose aim consists in linking the environmental and the political and social issues. The development of this field is the consequence of the social focus on the environmental issue to the detriment of the social and political ones. This is the cause and the consequence of the emergence of *sustainable development* as a global issue.

2.2 Sustainable development: a social and political demand

What is this sustainable development which acts as a backdrop to generate reflection upon the urban crisis? To put it into a nutshell, *sustainable development* is a new way of thinking about society and social relationships, a kind of paradigm which is spreading all over the world. It deals not only with environmental issues, even if public opinion mainly focuses on them. It stems from the realisation that the world is now reached a completed state and that humanity will have to cope with the lack of natural resources.

Of course, we can criticize this concept – various authors have done so. The main criticism consists in underlining the fact that *sustainable development* is a located paradigm. It was elaborated during the Cold War and can appear today as the continuation of that war by other means (Brunel, 2004); indeed, in the name of sustainable development, the great powers justify – or not – the legitimacy of groups or States to develop themselves. Moreover, this concept is deeply influenced by the Western conception of nature as it appeared at the end of the 19th century: nature is under threat and needs to be preserved. What is amazing today is not the importance of this concept of sustainable development (*i.e.* the fact that both political authorities and the business world justify their actions in the name of sustainable development), but its diffusion all over the world. How is it possible for such a located concept to be integrated by such diverse populations?

We can assume that the world social demand explains this amazing diffusion, especially the environmental demand. That is why the implementation of sustainable development mainly focuses on solving environmental issues. Because of the acuteness of the current urban crisis, the city appears as the main arena to implement sustainable development, insofar as they both concentrate the main part of the world population and the various issues that need to be solved.

3. The city as a testing ground for our scientific disciplines

Implementing sustainable development in our way of living seems to provide a challenge. I would further suggest that sustainable development is also a challenge for all the scientists who have now to consider their own scientific concepts, methods and practices.

3.1 A political question

Sustainable development is a political question which invites us to think differently about the political dimension of our societies. For instance, the current urban crisis serves to reveal the inadequacies in governance and administration, while the environmental problems only reveal the inefficiency of politics. So, the priority is to solve political dysfunctions by imagining a new way of living together and founding a new social contract.

The city seems to be the best place to elaborate this new social contract. First, as I mentioned earlier, cities concentrate the main part of the world population. Furthermore, the scale of

cities is appropriate to implement such reflexions upon the co-existence of people. The city becomes a sort of laboratory to work out these processes. Moreover, according to Colin Crouch (Crouch, 2004), we are now living in a post-democratic era: two major evolutions characterize the current period. On the one hand, economic power is increasingly more important than political power. On the other hand, supra-national organisations (such as the European Union, or the World Trade Organisation, *etc.*) are more powerful than States which are organised along the principles of representative democracy. Whereas citizens are generally subjected to top-down decisions, people in a sustainable city are invited to inverse this tendency and to take bottom-up action.

By promoting new forms of government (such as the direct participation of all citizens, *etc.*), sustainable development invites us to go back to the origin of cities, *i.e.* the place where political organisation was first codified. This is possible thanks to the specific dynamics of urban societies. The implementation of the sustainable city is the continuation of urban dynamics by other means. It is no longer any use trying to oppose them!

3.2 A scientific challenge

I would like now to focus on the ability of the social sciences to analyse this phenomenon and to take sustainable development into account as a major emerging paradigm. Whereas Western intellectual modernity relies on the strict separation between *nature* and *culture*, sustainable development invites us to change our point of view on the world and its recent changes. Scientists have therefore to follow this emerging path (Latour, 2004 *a.* and *b.*) to construct scientific objects that pair up both social and environmental dimensions as well as environmental and political ones.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to focus on these current processes: the world-wide diffusion and the assimilation of sustainable development, especially in cities, invite scientists to examine the conditions which make their knowledge efficient in understanding societies. Taking account with sustainable development, scientists have to realise that societies have deeply evolved and that the patterns they are accustomed to use for its analysis must be brought up to date. That's why sustainability appears as a paradigm: it is a huge work in progress for all of us.

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