INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO CITYSPACE:
FROM THE POSTMODERN TO THE GLOBAL CITY

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ABSTRACT

Cityspace has been the topic of urban and cultural studies for at least two decades and has opened a variety of ways to approach the city, from historical and cultural perspectives to socio-geographical, economic, religious, literary, postmodernist, post-colonial and, more recently, geo-critical ones. The article looks at the European and American city from the 1970s to the present through the lenses offered by the theoretical approaches by Edward Soja, David Harvey, Michel Foucault, Frederick Jameson, Bertrand Westphal, Manuel Castells, among others, while highlighting the specific characteristics of cityspace and citizenship, the use and misuse of living and imagined spaces in the period mentioned above. The shift from the modern city to the postmodern metropolis and global megalopolis has entailed essential changes in the views on cityspace both from the architectural perspective and from the city dweller’s perception of space in the city. How these changes have affected our lives and what the city of the future will look like are two core questions this article attempts to answer.

Keywords: postmodernism, postmetropolis, megalopolis, global city, network society

INTRODUCTION

Cityspace is a term coined by the cultural geographer and urban theorist, Eduard Soja, in 2000 and refers to the urban space from three perspectives, out of which the third is described as complete, encompassing all possible aspects of the city. In his approach to the city, Soja, the founder of the Los Angeles School of urban studies, identifies three kinds of cityspace Firstspace, which he describes as the real, material city, Secondspace, the imagined city, and Thirdspace, a combination of the former two, described as “a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual” lived space of the city, “a locus of structured individual and collective experience”. [1] While the first two kinds of cityspace offer, according to him, an incomplete perspective on space in the city, Thirdspace offers a more complex, exploratory view which allows the critic to look at the city from historical, economic, cultural, human geographic, social and fictional perspectives. [1] Edward Soja’s acceptance of the fictional, literary approach to the city, and the inclusion of this approach in the meaning of the Thirdspace concept has brought him the criticism of the Chicago School of Urbanism, whose representatives (Manuel Castells, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre) were mainly looking at the economic and social dimensions of urban life, at the expense of the “real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual” lived-in space of the city [1], which Soja features in his analysis of the postmodern metropolis, offering Los Angeles as a case study.
The distinction between the two schools of thought in the field of urbanism lies in the contrast between a modernist approach to the city, based on social Darwinist struggles for urban space (e.g., Harvey’s theory of “social justice” in the city) supported by the Chicago School and a postmodernist, postfordist vision advanced by the Los Angeles School. The latter relies on the postmodernist concepts of heterotopic and hyperreal space (Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson) on Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist philosophy, on Mike Davis’s analysis of social class and power and on Edward Soja’s cross-disciplinary vision and deep insightful views on exploring the city and the lives of its inhabitants. One of the weak points of Soja’s theory, according to the Chicago School critics lies in the fact that Soja applies it to Los Angeles, California, considered to be the paradigmatic postmodern American postmetropolis, whereas other postindustrial metropolis may not fit so well into his theory.

The aim of this article is to offer a reading of the city through time with a focus on the period between the latter half of the twentieth century and the present and with a view to highlighting both schools’ approach to the city. My intention is to draw attention to a number of aspects that are recognizable nowadays in a postmetropolis, irrespective of its geographical position, to distinguish between the modern, postmodern/ist city (or postmetropolis) and the way it is perceived by its dwellers and to look at the world/global city (or megalopolis) as its latest stage and its possible cultural representations. What will the city of our future look like?

FROM THE MODERN TO THE POSTMODERN CITY

The modern city, usually referring to the industrial metropolis from the nineteenth century to the 1950’s and ’60s comes with two important characters: the crowd and the stroller, the flâneur. Either tarred by industrialism, poverty and the existence of the slums or shaken by revolutionary upheavals whose target was to overthrow the monarchical or foreign governments, the cities witnessed, in the nineteenth century, the birth of the crowd, who became the city’s collective character. It is the crowd, the popular classes, and their entry into political life that became characteristic of the modern city for the tremendous role that they played in history. Besides the crowd, with its representative, the leveled “crowd-man,” excellently described by Le Bon [2], there is another type of city dweller that appears at the turn of the twentieth century: the street-stroller, the flâneur, whose specific activity was to observe the city and distinguish between the eternal and the transitory and who is fascinated by, and awed at, the colors and smells of the growing metropolis. This attitude leads to a number of things that are represented by the literature and the arts of the time: one, the focus on the dwellers and the way in which they perceive the city through the senses. In this case, the lived city offers as many perceptions of the city as the number of its city-dwellers. Two, the shift from viewing the city as a centripetal entity (meaning that life in the city is controlled from central institutions that function as a central force) to looking at the city as centrifugal (meaning that the central institutions have lost their grip on the city and that the center multiplies according to various cultural and symbolic correspondences of space and time which the dweller creates in his/her mind.) Experiencing the city through the senses creates a plural, imaginary, subjective
image of the city unique to each inhabitant. Therefore, each individual offers a
distinct urban imaginary, a mental or a sensory map of the city which renders
cityspace highly subjective. An example to this effect is the mapping of Dublin by
Joyce in Ulysses (1922). Although Joyce claimed that, if by any chance, Dublin
disappeared from the face of the earth, it could be completely remade following his
maps in the novel, the truth is that it could not. The geographical sites, the major
buildings and the institutions are perceived through the senses of the three major
characters, offering distinct, even opposite views on the same lived or imaginary
space. Subjectivity is so intense that the recreation of the city according to the
characters' perceptions would lead to the creation of a multiple city on juxtaposed
layers of individual perception.

This shift from looking at the city as an objective reality to the subjective
conception of reality is highly enriched after WW II by the postmodernist vision of
reality. Thus, contrary to looking at reality as the amount of facts and events
surrounding us, a view of utter importance to nineteenth-century realism and idea
of progress, or identifying reality with subjective consciousness, postmodernism
vouches a complete disbelief in representing reality altogether, irrespective of its
being mirrored by the mind (Rorty), by an institution (Foucault) or by language
(Derrida). According to postmodernist theory, reality cannot be singular, but plural,
manifesting itself through highly subjective perceptions, while meaning cannot be
fixed, clear, but fluid, plural, and very much elusive. Therefore, the notion of reality
becomes inclusive, encompassing the heterotopic and the hyperreal. This obviously
alludes to Michel Foucault's description of "heterotopia" [3] and Jean Baudrillard's
definition of "hyperreality" [4]. By including the "heterotopia" and "hyperreality"
concepts in discussing urban space, postmodernist theory envisages the city as
structures in relation or as multiple signs (Baudrillard) in which diachronic systems
(including space and time) are replaced with synchronic ones. The city becomes
thus a state of mind, a vortex or a maze, controlled by institutions and systems of
power, but impossible to manage by the individual.

A highly revealing example to this effect is Frederic Jameson's inclusion, and
description of, The Bonaventure Hotel (Los Angeles) in his seminal essay:
Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991) [5]. He compares
The Bonaventure with the Pompidou-Beaubourg Center in Paris and the Eaton
Center (Toronto), from the similar way in which these three buildings (all finished
in the 1970s by different architects) envisage space as a complete world in itself,
creating a miniature city for people to move in and congregate. As he states in his
essay:

I believe that, with a certain number of other characteristic postmodern
buildings, such as the Beaubourg in Paris or the Eaton Centre in Toronto, the
Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature
city; to this new total space, meanwhile, corresponds a new collective practice, a
new mode in which individuals move and congregate, something like the practice
of a new and historically original kind of hypercrowd. [5]

Such buildings offer a completely different experience of space: they
discourage independent mobility, obliging the visitors used with the strolling
through the place to give themselves up to “transportation machines” or to be surprised at unexpected entries into the building and unimagined positions of ordinary places such as shops, bars and registration desks. This also challenges the concept of the crowd and alienates the stroller.

In his particular reading of the city, Manuel Castells launches the idea according to which the capitalist-industrialists took control over the production of space and turned the city into a container of capitalist inscriptions, which created an “urban ideology” [6] or a “myth of urban culture” [6], which he is opposing. On the other hand, David Harvey’s formulations look at the urban changes in the 1950s through the 1970s, officially described as “urban renewal” or urban planning. In his view, these renewals actually meant the forced removal of the poor people or of ethnic communities from certain areas, mainly downtown, to create space for financial or governmental buildings or more elegant residential areas, a re-enactment of the urban planning by Wren and Hausmann in the previous centuries. However, while in the western cities, this forced removal was effected by both economy and population distribution politics, in Bucharest, for example, the erasing of a whole district for the building of the megastructure called People’s House in the 1980s is an example that falls in the category which Harvey calls the “redistribution of injustice” and which Soja describes Harvey’s formulation as a shift from “liberal to socialist formulation” views. [7]

Grounding his theory on Jameson, on Manuel Castells, David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja offers a reading of the city through equally strong, Marxist economic and social lenses. Soja’s approach to cityspace is crucial in his attempt to discuss the postindustrial, highly technologized city as a symbiosis of constructive and destructive energies living together (“synekism”) or as a hybrid space including both wild and inhabited areas, also productive of opposing energies [1]. Soja has an economic, cultural and human-geographic approach to the city, which he supports with urban policies and figures. He offers a geographer’s view on cityspace which we find translated into fiction in the postmodernist writers’ reading of the city.

MEGALOPOLIS, OR THE GLOBAL CITY

The rise of globalization has brought about a different perspective on the city, which is measured and analyzed according to its “world-cityness,” namely according to its place in the hierarchy of the largest cities in the world as Jayne and Ward claim in their introduction to Urban Theory (New Critical Perspectives) [8]. Whether they are labeled alpha, beta and gamma world cities [9], global, sub-global and regional cities [10], ‘mega’ city-regions or, simply, ‘city-regions’ [11], the analysis of the world/global city reveals a few aspects that have manifested themselves in the postindustrial society and should, therefore, be taken into account. These aspects refer, on the one hand, to an agglomeration of population in a few megalopolises (cities with over 5 million inhabitants), the presence of multinational institutions, tourism and culture industry and, on the other hand, to the air and rail connectivity to the world. In this way, the global ‘mega’ cities (like New York, London, Tokyo, Shanghai) have turned into “spatial nodes” with specific economic,
political and cultural characteristics which assured their success in the globalizing world [8].

Manuel Castells’s (2004, 2006) theory of the network society has inspired the urbanist scholars in describing the global mega-cities as spatial nodes. According to Castells and a few more analysts of the digital world, the network society functions like any network, meaning that it has no center, only nodes that serve the network in terms of varying relevance [12]. Any network has been assigned goals and rules of performance, which makes networks cooperate or compete with each other through the inclusion or exclusion of ‘nodes’ and the operational programming of ‘switches’ that regulate the network. Since the core activities that shape and control human life everywhere on the planet are organized in these global networks [12], it is obvious that the urban areas, in which there is an agglomeration of nodes as well as of people, function according to the structure and rules of the networks. In analyzing the power in the social networks, Castells considers that it is dependent on its programmed goals. Thus, for instance, as he claims, “in global capitalism, the global financial market has the last word and the IMF is the authoritative interpreter for ordinary mortals” [12]. The IMF’s verdict, therefore, affects both a certain society and the urban areas in which the people live. As a consequence, cities can grow or decline, the countryside can develop or dilute according to economic interests and financial gains.

Historically, networks have always existed and formed the pattern of life on the planet both geographically and in terms of communication. However, while in the past the networks functioned as an extension of power that was concentrated at the top (state, religious institutions, army, etc.) in the present, the networks lack the vertical organization due to their global structure. Therefore, they both have helped the forming of the global cities and support their existence. Most recent urban theories (from 2010 to the present) have attempted to develop a balanced understanding of the urban territory, with a special focus on the connectivity between the urban spaces (Jayne and Ward, 2017 [8]). In other words, urban theories, as diverse as they are, try to make sense of the urban world from cross- and inter-disciplinary angles overlapping geography with economy and culture, but also with consumption, technology, feminism, travel and, obviously, with sociology. In this respect, Castells’s theory of the network society both supports and explains the existence of the global city. The network society, which operates in a global “space of flows” (Castells 2004, 2006), leads to regional concentrations which develop an informational global economy and cultural industries (music, TV, film, computer games, literature, design, learning materials), based on, and dependent upon, the latest communication technology, media and digitalization [13].

From a postcolonial perspective, any labeling or hierarchy of the global cities reflects the western geographical imagination; therefore the study of the city and cityspace should not be reduced to case studies discussed according to western capitalist criteria (Said, 1978, Spivak, 1993). On the contrary, the (former) colonized cities reveal specific aspects, a mixture of the local and the foreign, that do not fit into any of the categories mentioned above, but should be taken into consideration in a more detailed analysis of cityspace. The postcolonial approach to
the city questions the traditional Marxist view and highlights the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1979) in hidden and overt ways, focusing on a large range of institutions that relate to health, crime, ‘deviance,’ sexuality, networks of power. Actually, Foucault’s theory, which has generally influenced the shaping of poststructuralist methods that uncover hidden power relations, could be applied to the analysis of any city. Moreover, if the city is looked upon as a text or as discourse, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) poststructuralist theory, underpinning the confrontation between human and non-human actors in political and social struggles, could also be applied.

Drawing on Castells’s theory, especially on his description of the space of flows in the network society, John Rennie Short (2006) examines specific flows in the contemporary global urban network, such as airlines and connectivity to the world. In this sense, he describes London as the hub of global airline flows, Los Angeles as a Pacific Rim world city, Amsterdam as a European world city and Miami as the global city of Latin America and the Caribbean [14]. Additionally, he introduces two major aspects in the labeling and description of the global city: the distribution of advanced producer services (accountancy, advertising, banking, law, management consultancy), which operate in and through ‘offices’ (the “metaphor” of the postindustrial city) and the presence of migration flows [14]. These aspects lead to a “polarized city” in terms of income and life-style, generally consisting of two categories of people: the office goers during the day and the office cleaners during the night.

It is obvious that neither the postmetropolis nor the megalopolis (or the global city) look anything like the modern industrial city whose transformation into the postindustrial city of today started after WW II. Moreover, the uneven development of economic, political and cultural globalization is constantly creating new forms of social and spatial organization. Therefore, the world city should be researched in the process of “becoming”, rather than on the status of “being” global [14]. The dynamics of “becoming” reveals another important aspect of globalizing the ‘city’. Being one simple element in regional economic agglomerations, the city becomes a node in the circulation patterns of the network flows. The development of various zones in the city, especially at the peripheral area, the creation of new cheaper sites, to which jobs and services move, turn the ‘city’ into an urban region.

In the cultural and literary fields, the recent views on culture and society, human geography and literary criticism have given birth to geocriticism, a theory that connects “human spaces” with mimetic arts and reveals “through, and in, texts, the image, and cultural interactions related to them” [15]. In other words, Bertrand Westphal, the creator of geo-criticism, proposes a geo-cultural way of reading spaces, whether real, imaginary or both, which builds on transgressivity (with its deterриториization and reterritorialization components), on referentiality and on imagology [15]. What he does is to propose an analysis of literary and cultural texts envisaging cityspace as a mobile territory with an ephemeral demarcation, constantly subjected to both de- and re-territorialization forces. In this way, Westphal connects geography to literary studies and creates an interdisciplinary approach to real, imagined and lived-in space.
CONCLUSION

Irrespective of the way we look at the city as a postindustrial metropolis, as a
global city or as a global city-region, the paradigmatic shifts from modernity to
postmodernity have deeply affected the perception of the city first by decentralizing
the stable structure of the industrial city and, then, by adding a global dimension to
the city that has reduced its national importance and has increased its regional one.
The changes in the paradigm have impacted the city-dwellers in their perspective
on, and perception of, cityspace. Returning to Soja’s Thirdspace concept [1], it
definitely encompasses the various ways of living and imagining the city, as real
and virtual reality, as a living space for distinct groups, or communities, or for
individuals. Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, Baudrillard’s definition of
hyperreality, Jameson’s description of postmodern ruptures and disorientation in
urban culture, as well as Soja’s “synekism” [1] have produced, under the power-
knowledge pair that governs our world, spatial strategies of connection and growth,
but also of dispossession, difference, and authority that apply to any city whether
postmetropolis or megalopolis. Whatever space in the city we may occupy, we live
in areas of conflicting geographical imaginations, constantly chartered by
postcolonial (re)mappings and postmodern urban representations.

REFERENCES


