REVIEW ARTICLE

Intellectual Fashion and Sustainable Urban Policies

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Duncan McLaren and Julian Agyeman. 2015. *Sharing Cities. A Case for Truly Smart and Sustainable Cities*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.
Emanuela Guano. 2017. *Creative Urbanity. An Italian Middle Class in the Shade of Revitalization*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Social research and academic publications are not immune to fashion. In the social sciences, while researchers aim to understand social phenomena and social changes, it is not unusual that the academic establishment either fails to recognise the relevance of new phenomena or, for the sake of securing funding, encourages politically-fashionable projects with the aim of developing and, of course, selling forecasting analyses and grand universal models which are often detached from the empirical reality. When in the 1980s the emerging environmental movements began to voice their concern about our planet's future, the political and the academic establishments were all too eager to dismiss their protests as a fleeting, mainly youth, movement. In spite of timid interest among a few scholars, still in the 1990s even disciplines like anthropology — notoriously concerned with the human-nature relationship — only lukewarmly welcomed environmental research and tolerated the attendant publications.[1] Nor, at the time, were politicians and the academic establishment ready to acknowledge the relevance of studying issues of legitimacy that were affecting various sectors of society across the world, including an increasingly bureaucratized governance, which only a handful of scholars were courageous enough to tackle.[2] Today, both environment and legitimacy have become hot topics alongside climate change and world sustainability, in which cities play a major role. Concomitant with this awakening, new fashionable research has flourished, producing such buzz words like, smart city, creative industry, creative class, sharing economy, green economy, resilient city, global city, just city, inclusive city, urban revitalization, gentrification, and so on. In some cases, embracing fashionable research trends in order to secure funding has stimulated innovative analysis. In other cases, however, the pursuit of intellectual fashion has gone hand in hand with scholarly laziness. The book by Emanuela Guano on *Creative Urbanity* seems to fall in this latter category.

Broadly drawing on Richard Florida's sixteen-year old concept of 'creative class' (2002), Guano claims originality for her work when she states that the social groups described in her book 'have often been neglected by anthropological inquiry' (p.6). The social groups in questions are the Genoa's university-educated middle class who have been left out of the

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[1] A key example was Kay Milton's edited volume (1993).

2 A case in point is Italo Pardo's edited volume (2000).

professional job market. Apart from being obviously unaware of the vast array of mainstream anthropological studies on urban elites that have been carried out since the 1980s, Guano also ignores recent anthropological works on the ways in which urban professionals cope with the economic crisis and job insecurity of neo-liberal policies (among the many, Spyridakis 2013). Guano's book is above all a personal journey whose principal aim is to expose the Italian practices of nepotism and corruption in the allocation of professional jobs, particularly in academia, that forced many of her unemployed intellectual informants to explore opportunities in the 'creative industry' which, as in many other North American and European cities, had become fashionable in Genoa's policy of urban regeneration. In the Genoa case discussed by Guano, the educated middle class have reinvented themselves as street antique dealers, festival organizers, walking tour guides or small business owners. Many of her informants are old friends and, as she says, some new informants have become friends during the research. The description of the Genoese trendy bohemianism is preceded by an overview of the city's industrial decline and the revitalization attempts of the 1990s. Frustratingly, however, the book does not engage with the real contribution that these new bohemians may have made to the city's economic development. She also fails to address the socio-economic inequalities brought about by the creative industry and the revitalization projects and ignores the critical debate that followed Florida's theorization on creative class and economic development.

Sharing Cities by McLaren and Agyeman also deals with fashionable ideas that have entered the political arena. However, while driven by a messianic call to save the planet, the authors attempt to move away from the standard, and in their view limited, approach of the sharing economy. The book's main argument is that the 'sharing paradigm' that the authors propose ought to be a central aspect of city governance. This paradigm, they argue, runs counter the social fragmentation and commercialization of the public sphere and offers cities the opportunity to become truly smart, just, inclusive and sustainable. *Sharing cities* analyses six of the 'C40 Cities';[3] they are: Amsterdam, Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore), Copenhagen, Medellín, San Francisco and Seoul. The authors want to show the successful potential of 'sharing the whole city', in the sense of sharing the public realm, both physical and virtual, encouraging collaboration and trust, civic engagement and political activism. Through these case-studies, McLaren and Agyeman seek to demonstrate 'how, with modern technologies, the intersection of urban space and cyberspace provides an unrivalled platform for more just, inclusive and environmentally efficient economies and societies rooted in a sharing culture' (p.1). New digital and smart technology are regarded as vital to this 'sharing paradigm', which should include sharing consumption and production as opposed to the models of urban development that have deepened the divide in the economic prospects of different urban dwellers, like for instance the creative class model.

The template of the sharing, and shared, cities proposed by McLaren and Agyeman seems to oppose the creative class approach, according to which a city's success is determined by becoming an attractive 'consumer city' of skilled people. As many critics have pointed out, linking the 'creative class' to urban economic development, not just in theory but also in policy-

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[3] On the C40 Cities Network see https://www.c40.org/

making, has produced new inequalities between a higher-skilled, and usually well paid, creative job market and lower-skilled and lower-paid 'service class' jobs; especially, to name a few, in sectors like food preparation and home health care.

Having argued that the future of humanity is urban, McLaren and Agyeman set out to show that cities are drivers of a 'shared revolution' that would provide solutions to world challenges. The sharing paradigm that they propose is not limited to 'sharing the city'; it also implies a 'global' sharing culture. Through sharing, they claim, cities across the world can learn from each other how to 'fix themselves' and, in so doing, 'fix' the planet. Key dimensions of this sharing paradigm are: 'intrinsically motivated communal sharing' and 'extrinsically motivated commercial sharing'. Both kinds of sharing can be mediated through learning and evolve into common sociocultural values. In their model, examples of communal sharing include peer-to-peer sharing, service co-production, not-for profits, the gift economy, which would hopefully evolve into the 'collective commons' approach and a collaborative lifestyle. Examples of commercial sharing include the sharing economy of ventures like Airbnb and Zipcar, which implies 'dis-ownership' and an 'access economy' and would hopefully evolve into the 'collective economy' of open-sourcing and peer production. The six selected urban case studies are examined in six separate chapters to address different aspects of sharing. San Francisco provides an example of 'sharing as a collaborative consumption'; Seoul is used to illustrate shared domains of production and exchange; the chapter on Copenhagen focuses on political and cultural dimensions of sharing; the Medellín case is used to discuss issues of equity and social justice; the chapter on Amsterdam explores how different dimensions of the 'sharing paradigm' could reinforce one another, also highlighting some obstacles and challenges; Bengaluru is taken as an example of the prospects of sharing in cities of the 'developing world', pointing out how the pursuit of 'smart' policies may indeed run counter sharing and justice.

In different ways, these two books should alert social scientists of the fallacy of relying on abstract models or of the attempt to enforce universal templates. *Sharing Cities* does offer interesting urban case studies but would have benefitted from addressing the cultural, social, political and economic differences and similarities of these urban realities and their practical significance in attempting to implement a specific urban template. Less jargon would also been welcome. *Creative Urbanity* makes equally frustrating reading. While Guano addresses nepotism in the intellectual job market and makes a passing reference to the critically important *tangentopoli* (bribesville) political scandal of the early 1990s, she fails to engage with its contemporary ramifications; particularly, the corruption underlying the private-public deals that rather than creating a true revitalized and inclusive city has produced crumbling infrastructures and the attendant games of back-passing responsibility. This is the kind of corruption that lies at the root of structural and human disasters like the collapse of the Genoa's Morandi Bridge in August 2018.

Most significantly for the responsibility of intellectual production and for the future of society, these two books invite reflection on the danger of attempting to translate fashionable intellectual ideas into policy. They alert the reader to the absolute need for empirically-grounded analysis. From different disciplinary fronts, today scholars are doggedly attempting

to make the social sciences matter.[4] For it to matter, however, social analysis needs to be based on solid ethnographic research; it needs to addresses the specificity of each sociological setting and bring out its comparative significance and theoretical value.

References

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[4] See, for example, the Palgrave initiative 'Social Sciences Matter' and recent debates on why ethnography matters (https://www.palgrave.com/us/social-science-matters/pardo-and-prato-on-why-ethnography-matters).