Ceci n'est pas une Pipe": Unpacking Injustice in Paris

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"We all know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?" says a famous Zen Koan. At first consideration, it seems impossible to conjecture about the "just city" without having already in mind what is an "unjust city," and vice versa. But my opinion is that this is wrong: It is possible to define what a "just city" is *per se*. To give flesh and substance to this essay I will focus on Paris and sustainability. First, because they are my fields of expertise, but also because sustainability and justice are two alleged priorities cited lavishly by planners and elected officials to promote their urban policies. Their *doxa* considers that these two priorities are perfectly synergistic, but they are not. Planning for one may produce redlines in the other: sustainable policies often increase social injustice, as shown by Elizabeth Burton in a large sample of U.K. cities,[1] or by Neil Smith when he denounced the veil thrown over profoundly unfair environmental dynamics that involve the departure of socially vulnerable people out of newly gentrified ecological neighborhoods.[2] In fact sustainability and justice are like two rival brothers, and combining them in urban policies is certainly challenging.

One among the many challenges of urban sustainability is re-establishing the inclusiveness of the urban fabric instead of just popping up buildings and projects. But generally, it doesn't work like that. Mayors, representatives and other elected officials adore showcasing constructions, and they love them brand new. They are so much more visible. They are less interested in urban design and holistic approaches, which are more important for fostering sustainability but harder to implement and less profitable as an electoral issue.

Thus, a sustainable city should result from the confrontation—or the synergy—of choices made by multiple actors, each acting for its own concern. But usually, only elected officials, developers and technical staff are invited to the table, which is a big mistake. All those who are affected by the decisions should be involved in the process of decision-making, as shown by the failure of *La Trame verte et bleue* (green and blue Grid) in the region of Paris (a land management tool for the preservation of biodiversity). Local and regional authorities forgot a few things when fixing them. They forgot that livability, justice and sustainability are technically three different things, but three things that should contribute together to what the people affected by their policies will call a "good environment." A "good environment" is one in which the improvement of environmental conditions *sensu stricto* (water quality, air, biodiversity, etc.) leads to improved living conditions. A polluted environment can be a place where life is good. Conversely, an environment with clean air and clean water can be quite intolerable, as evidenced by windswept, segregated social-housing complexes settled in the middle of nowhere, where the quality of life is low. The developers of *La Trame verte et bleue* just didn't care to ask the people what a "good environment" was for them, much less make room for them at the decision-making table, as I explained in a recent paper.[3] Do you know that the current regional master plan of Paris proposes—as an important means to foster sustainability—a quantitative objective of 10m^2 of public green area per inhabitant? As though it were sufficient to display "green" to become suddenly sustainable. Amazing, isn't it?

Urban sustainability should be about designing a new social contract that addresses the following questions: What type of society do we want to live in? Which compromises are necessary between the goals and interests of the different actors?

Well, the very notion of a social contract has a lot to do with justice—at least social justice—right? Which raises a tricky issue: What can we say about "Justice and the City?" (No, it is not a new sitcom, it is a real question.)

Let me dig into my own history to answer this question as clearly as possible. I was born in Paris. I grew up in a neighborhood called La Goutte d'Or, east of Montmartre, bordered by railways, technical facilities and railroad tracks. Not a nice place to live. In the 19th century, Émile Zola set the plot of his novel of his novel, "L'Assommoir," in La Goutte d'Or, depicting it as a miserable slum. In the 1960s, it was a highly disadvantaged place, characterized by substandard housing and violence in the streets. It still is.

I remember that in the 1970s the Paris City Council initiated a program of urban renewal: libraries, parks and gardens (*square Léon* and *square Amiraux-Boinod*) were created, as well as swimming pools (*Piscine des Amiraux, piscine Bertrand Dauvin*). Did it change anything? Not even the slightest. The contents of the trashcans still littered the streets. Substandard housing was still there. So were the drug dealers and thugs. What happened, or better, what did not happen that should have? Well, nobody frequented these new libraries, parks and pools. The population stuck to its usual way of living, as if these amenities were not for them. They were perceived as vague threats, put there only by the will of planners and local moguls, rather than opportunities for a richer life. It was not so much a matter of access and capability. The people decided not to use them because they considered that they didn't belong to their world. They built an invisible wall between themselves and these amenities.

Nowadays, *La Goutte d'Or* has become a "Sensitive Urban Zone" (ZUS), a prioritized urban area characterized by a high percentage of public housing, high unemployment, a low percentage of high-school graduates and huge security issues. For the record, it was the ZUS that were misrepresented by Fox News in January 2015 as "no-go zones."

As a teen, each and every day day I crossed another invisible wall to go to a Parisian high school in Montmartre, which was already a fashionable place to live. Lucky me! My father was a refugee from Spain, and I benefited from a better cultural background than most of the kids in my age group. I skipped a grade and had the chance to integrate into a high school outside *La Goutte d'Or*. Out of more than 200 kids in my neighborhood, only three of us had this option. When I wonder what my other schoolmates became, I feel a bit depressed. Anyway, three of us were going to school out of *La Goutte d'Or*, and I remember our discussions: *Why do we never meet our old friends there? Why do they never cross the line?* We did, every day, and nobody ever treated us badly. There were no official boundaries, no gates confining them to a ghetto. They could go to the *cafés*, to the movies or just walk the nice streets and hang out there. But they didn't. They didn't feel like they belonged to this other Paris.

What does my experience say about justice and the city in Paris? It says that people suffering from bad living conditions are not only victims of planning procedures, hidden political agendas, segregation or whatever else—or, at least, they are not only victims in need of help. They are also actors whose choices, convictions and presuppositions contribute to contribute to maintaining, worsening and even, in some cases, creating, the miserable conditions in which they live. In the case of *La Goutte d'Or,* internal social barriers got transformed into internal spatial barriers—invisible walls.

These invisible walls go both ways. Let's turn our attention to the case of *Seine-Saint-Denis*, north of Paris. The place has a very negative image, both for its inhabitants as well as for the Parisians living outside. It is associated with environmental shortcomings due to its industrial heritage. This prejudice remains very strong despite de-industrialization 40 years ago and despite many major urban regeneration programs, among them sustainable neighborhoods and green areas. To this day, it is a "bad area" and a stigmatizing place to live. It is not a coincidence that almost all of last year's French urban riots took place in the large housing complexes of *Seine-Saint-Denis*. As mentioned by Susan Fainstein[4], desirable end states and the forces needed to achieve them should be contemplated simultaneously in urban planning.

This means that fostering a just city is not about repairing previous mistakes to help people reduced to the status of "victims." It is not about undoing what seems unjust. It never works. The expressions of injustice are exactly what they look like: expressions, representations and symptoms that something has been going wrong. They are like the pipe in Magritte's famous painting, "The Treachery of Images." It shows a pipe, and written under it are the words "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" (This is not a pipe). This statement means that the painting itself is not a real pipe. You can't smoke it. You can't touch it. Similarly, the expressions of injustice are the result of complex dynamics. We cannot make things better only by opposing the expressions of injustice in the city. It would be like treating a disease only by addressing only the symptoms, or trying to smoke the pipe of Magritte.

Oh, wait a minute…but we tried for decades and are still trying, with nothing to show for it but gutted neighborhoods.

Two or three years ago, I paid a visit to *La Goutte d'Or*. Nothing had changed. Well, actually it is not all that true. The environmental goods that rained down on *La Goutte d'Or*—parks, plazas, cleanups, etc.—produced some results, though very slowly, and not the ones that were expected. In the last two or three years the structure of the population has begun to change in some patches, such as *Place de l'Assommoir*, *villa Poissonnière* and *Rue Polonceau*. An embryonic gentrification is underway there, with a continuous and lasting rise in house and apartment prices (+144 percent in only four years). Where are the evicted people relocating? Who knows? If this is going to be the only result of these "repairing" policies, it really is a miserable one.

The more top-down repairing planning procedures are, the fewer positive results they achieve. Building a just city is something different, completely. It requires involving everybody in the decisions and the definition of

the policies, not only of their neighborhoods but also of the city as a whole, as I showed in a recent article where I detailed how local actors, non-market organizations, local communities and individuals able to form self-determined user associations should be involved in the making of the city.[5] The just city requires the right to decide and the power to create, renewing and deepening what Henri Lefebvre calls *Le Droit à la Ville* (The Right to the City)[6].

The just city means seating everyone at the table, so that all the inhabitants understand that urban affairs are also their affairs. It is about erasing the invisible walls. In a very recent post for The Nature of Cities, I showed how the inhabitants of La Fournillière—a neighborhood of the French city of Nantes—erased one of these walls by turning a wasteland into a very popular park, combining leisure amenities and urban agriculture. They did it outside any legal framework, but they knew how to play the eternal game of deception and force, choosing to confront or bargain with the local authorities, so that at the end of it their reputed "illegal" initiative turned into an official amenity.

I don't pretend that seating everyone at the table will suddenly make poverty, segregation and lack of access disappear. It will not. But such an approach—even if insufficient—is the necessary condition to design and carry out a just city. ■

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