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City as a Political Idea

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City as a Political Idea

By Krzysztof Nawratek

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Krzysztof Nawratek's exploration of urbanisation is a welcome attempt to shake up the consensus

We live through a period of unprecedented urbanisation, but never has there been so little serious thought about what a city is, or what it could be. Cities are created by the free market as if as a force of nature, and are populated alternately by the favoured "citizen-consumer" and the marginalised non-citizen. And as the jingle goes, that has amazingly endured despite its very real bankruptcy, "there is no alternative".

While there is serious work on the far left — the Right to the City movement and its theoreticians — elsewhere the homilies of the Urban Renaissance and the Creative City have stood in for real debate. The Polish architect and urbanist Krzysztof Nawratek's dense, short tract *City as a Political Idea* is a very welcome attempt to shake up a self-congratulatory consensus.

For Nawratek, it is absurd to see the contemporary city as a success story. "Despite population growth", he writes, "Cities are dying as a political idea and as a way of life for their citizens based on self-managing communities." What remains are mere houses and workplaces, or heritage theme parks. Yet this isn't, mercifully, one of those books that laments hyper-urbanism while longing for hill-towns and piazzas. *City as a Political Idea* is stranger and more interesting than that. Its peculiar tone is part pedagogical and part self-consciously friendly, and across a series of elegantly translated philosophical meditations alternating with concrete examples, it tries to outline a malaise and offer solutions.

Riga's ex-mayor explicitly demands the poor be expelled from central areas

At the centre of Nawratek's argument is the claim that "not planning, not social programmes, but politics is the path of salvation for cities". This is certainly a statement that should be yelled at certain architects, but Nawratek's notion of politics is quite particular. It's based on the idea that politics and the polis are inextricable — that citizenship necessitates engagement.

Nawratek considers two current alternative notions of citizenship: "creative capital", based on cultural inclusiveness and apparent openness to outsiders that conceals a hostility towards the unsexy poor; and "social capital", based on cohesive bonds that can often become conservative and exclusionary. The difference between Hamas and Richard Florida, put simply. Neither are particularly attractive, but Nawratek considers that social capital at least leaves a space for politics as such — for the formation of and mutual aid in communities. Yet creative capital dominates, with the state acting as "a protective umbrella for private capital" in sundry regeneration schemes in

order to pull the moneyed into its cities — a familiar worldwide pattern.

City as a Political Idea has its cautionary cities, where the idea of polis is at its most moribund: Baghdad, where the US military walled in sectarianism; Paris, with its excluded, seething banlieues; and Belfast, where the “subjective city” has shrunk, for some, to a few streets around the Shankill, never venturing even the half-mile into the city centre.

The most penetrating passages are on the Latvian capital of Riga, in his account a disconcerting “democratic” city where the 30% of the population who are not registered as Latvian are non-citizens, not allowed to vote. Yet these Russian-speaking non-citizens are not ghettoised — they coexist in the same, parallel spaces as official citizens (London comes to mind). Riga’s ex-mayor explicitly demands that the poor be expelled from central areas.

Underpinning this is a shockingly Thatcherite conception of citizenship. Nawratek quotes the Riga Development Plan: “The increase in quality of life in a democratic society is founded on the efforts of the individual to take responsibility for their own quality of life.” Or, as they used to say here, on yer bike. Nawratek’s Riga is a big city in a country that likes to think of itself as rural, where the dream of a house in the country replaces the notion of making a qualitatively better city.

This isn’t a freak example — parallels abound with the “doughnut” cities of the US, or the suburban dreams of the UK. As a counter, Nawratek profiles and contrasts two conscious attempts at forming a contemporary polis — Porto Alegre in Brazil, with its annual “popular assembly”, and Singapore with its inclusive authoritarianism. Both examples appear to work for most of their inhabitants, although each is in some way exceptional. However his post-neoliberal alternative is something less limited — what he calls the “transcultural”, or more esoterically the “a-androgynic city” which will be inhabited by a “plug-in citizen”.

This is no libertarian utopia. It “is oppressive in its coercive interaction, it is brutal in the pursuit of meeting and mixing, and it is authoritarian in its search of a new, transcultural quality”. In space, this would entail a series of “corridors” running across the city — “anti-Haussmann boulevards” as he describes them — through which a mixed-use fabric of schools, workplaces and leisure facilities would be threaded.

These spaces would work like the old constructivist social condensers, “a combination of apparent contradictions in the sense of a higher order”, a “city-collage” based on a “mutual attachment and craving for contact and exchange” which would have no room for “closed housing estates, closed office complexes or closed shopping centres”.

It reads like a mild proposal, and Nawratek suggests it can be achieved by a “subtle hacking” of the current system rather than “dull destruction and negation”. But surely he knows that for these all-inclusive, transcultural, egalitarian “corridors” to come into being, a massive work of negation and destruction would have been necessary to make it possible. To use a banal example — it implies the complete end of the competition for the best school places that is so present in the UK. To do this would require either authoritarian action (meaning resistance) or a massive change in attitudes (surely possible only after huge social change). It is desirable, but it can’t be achieved by tinkering. Nawratek’s proposals could only work through a more antagonistic notion of politics than he is willing to countenance. That the question is being asked, however, is enough for now.

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