The contemporary city, its (multiple) representations, and representativeness: questions for research

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A cidade contemporânea, suas (múltiplas) representações e representatividades: indagações para pesquisas

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Abstract
The article stems from the conceptualization of 'representation' in cultural studies to further explore a range of images and discourses about contemporary urbanization, synthesized in certain adjectives applied to the word 'city' that became agendas with their own demands on what cities should aim for. It seeks to observe how these relate to the stated purposes of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals regarding cities, and how certain segments of society are privileged or neglected in the approximation or distancing between the objectives of these different approaches of the city nowadays.

Resumo
O artigo parte da conceituação de 'representação' nos estudos culturais para explorar uma gama de imagens e discursos sobre a urbanização contemporânea, sintetizadas em certos adjetivos aplicados à palavra 'cidade' que se tornaram agendas com pautas próprias sobre o que as cidades deveriam almejar. Procura-se observar como essas se relacionam com os propósitos declarados da Agenda 2030 e seus Objetivos do Desenvolvimento Sustentável no que diz respeito às cidades, e como determinados segmentos da sociedade são privilegiados ou preteridos na aproximação ou distanciamento entre os objetivos dessas diferentes abordagens da cidade na atualidade.

City representations

The study of *city representations* has become, in recent generations, one of the most important aspects of urban studies: the investigation of the city by means of an ever-broader array of sources, documents, and records – artistic and literary, technical and even lay – has proven itself a virtually endless wealth of understandings on the urban phenomenon.

This way of approaching the city has roots normally associated to the "cultural turn"[1] of the last quarter of the twentieth century in human sciences and is founded on the comprehension that the social process of urbanization has the cultural dimension as one of its constituting elements – which may not be reduced to mere "product" or "reflex" of other processes, be they economic or political.

Stuart Hall (2016) states the importance of "representations" on the studies on culture and relates them to language. Representation consists of a production of meaning by means of language and its sharing among members of a given culture; language elements mobilized for describing, depicting, or symbolizing a phenomenon refer, therefore, to a set of meanings shared by members of said group. Representation produces meanings, similarities, which enable recognition, or even propose a sample or substitution of reality, synthesizing its meanings in a recognizable model. Hall acknowledges at least three different approaches of representations in cultural studies:

1. Reflective: "Language simply reflects a meaning that already exists in the world of objects, people, or events" (HALL, 2016, p. 32)
2. Intentional: "Language expresses only what the speaker, writer, or painter means, the intentional meaning intended by him or her" (ibidem)
3. Constructivist: "The meaning is constructed in language and by means of it" (ibidem). This, which Hall considers the approach of greater impact on cultural studies in recent years, may yet be subdivided into two aspects: semi optical (influenced by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure), and discursive approach (associated with philosopher and historian Michel Foucault).

The constructivist approach opposes the common sense understanding on representations (which, in a way, echo the aspect Hall calls "reflective"), which view the *represented* as mere "product" or "reflex" – therefore, secondary and subordinate – of *objective* reality. Through this perspective, the study of the city must refuse the idea that there is a "real" city, whose representations (partial, sensible, subjective, and mediated) correspond to distortions or illusions in relation to reality. The problems with such idea could be synthesized in two points, fundamentally. Firstly, it is adequate to question who defines what may or may not acquire the status of "real," and for what reasons. Should we accept the argument that, since we live in a bourgeoise society and in a capitalist mode of production, relationships and processes that are not translated into strictly "economic" terms must be understood as "secondary" and, thus, subordinate in relation to those? Such inquiry may lead to the second issue, that of the hierarchization of modes of comprehension of the city: are problems of "economic" order priority or pressing in relation to those of sensible and emotional order, for instance?

The approach of cities from their representations have enabled, for a few generations, recognizing descriptions, discourses, narratives, and a set of images of the city that allow for greatly broaden the meaning of urban transformations for a portion of society who not always – or rather: rarely – has access to technical means and instances of political and economic decision making in order to be able to influence its course. Thus, in the words of playwright Plínio Marcos, is was possible to speak "[of the people who] only scream from the stands without ever influencing the result" (MARCOS, 1974). In short, the study of representations has allowed for the comprehension of urbanization as "experience"[2], in which every and any citizen is active subject and participant of the process of construction and transformation of the city, not only impotent, passive, and overdetermined spectators.

[1]The so-called "cultural turn" is an intellectual movement in the Humanities and Social Sciences that, from the beginning of the 1960s, brought culture to the center of contemporary debates on social phenomena, away from a positivist epistemology, and which includes various tendencies such as post-structuralism, cultural studies, literary criticism, and other forms of linguistic analysis.

[2]Central idea in the opus of British historian Edward Palmer Thompson, the notion of "experience" was not precisely defined by the author. But his use of the term emphasizes the non-deterministic mediation between historical events and the way they are perceived and interpreted by social agents, as a model of historical representation in which the "social being" and "social conscience" mutually influence one another.

Lastly, from a historiographic point of view, the relief conferred to the representations dialogues with a renewal of Social History itself, which began to refuse the schematism of certain economist and structuralist interpretations – the metaphor "base-superstructure" strongly questioned by authors such as E. P. Thompson[3] and Raymond Williams[4] – and incorporated to the documental *corpus* of its research an array of productions including literature, visual arts, cinema, and even popular music.

It is possible to adopt this perspective when observing how contemporary urbanization (as process) and urban (as phenomenon) have been portrayed in different current agendas. The multiplicity of adjectives currently attributed to the noun *city* highlights clear sections, with clear intentions, on aspects chosen to be emphasized and promoted according to the situation. This true "myriad" of representations is so broad it even earned, in recent years, a mapping in the form of "atlas" (KNOX, 2016). Hereafter, some of these "labels" attributed to the cities are presented, and their implicit (or declared) agendas are discussed.

- Competitive cities: the expression. Has been promoted by multilateral entities, such as the World Bank (2015), and stem from an initial fundamental finding: while contemporary cities are centers of economic growth and technological innovation, they are also territories that concentrate poverty and unemployment. The solution proposed by this line of work is *to increase the competitiveness* of a city, facilitating the growth of companies and industries as a means for job creation, and increase of productivity and income. Besides the obvious economic emphasis of such approach (a bank, after all), the study publicized by the World Bank stresses the role of the private sector, to which it attributes 75% of created jobs (*Competitive cities for jobs and growth*, 2015): hence the recipe proposed by the authors consists in adopting policies (and reforms) geared toward attracting, retaining, and expanding this economic sector. These policies would include the pursuit of their own "niches," especially in negotiable goods and services (not in retail or public services), the formulation of policies for the creation of a favorable "climate" for business. Such strategy, as would be expected, focuses on a specific and clearly defined public: the business community. The representation of the city as a "competitive" entity is closely linked to what David Harvey called "urban entrepreneurialism," that is, the conception of urban management as a process equivalent to business management (HARVEY, 1996).

- Creative cities: another concept promoted by a multilateral entity – this time, UNESCO, who also created, in 2004, a "Creative Cities Network" with the goal of promoting the cooperation with and between cities that identify *creativity* as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. The notion of creativity is, to a certain extent, also linked to a perspective of economic development (even if it added the qualifier "sustainable"). In this case, the emphasis rests on the so-called cultural industries (also known as "creative industries"). The concept has a longer history, dating back to the early 1980s, and is related to the efforts of the artistic community to justify its economic value and stress the importance of artists' creativity to the city ant the economy, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries (United States, followed by United Kingdom, and Australia), at the same time when UNESCO began to research cultural industries in general (LANDRY, 2011). Among the authors considered seminal for the concept, the following may be cited: Charles Landry himself who, in collaboration with Franco Bianchini, published, in 1995, the book *The Creative City*; John Howkins, author of *The Creative Economy* (2001); and Richard Florida, with his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, de 2002.

With numerous references and approaches, it is difficult to find a sole or consensual definition on what is a "creative city," and which are its conditions. For Ana Carla Fonseca Reis and André Urani (2011), a creative city is the one who becomes attractive to the creative industries and creative people. Such attractiveness is based on the "ability of its citizens of putting creativity into practice, and a cultural

[3]The subject is especially developed in his book *The poverty of theory or an orrery of errors* (THOMPSON, 1981), in which the author polemizes frontally to althusserian structuralism.

[4]In a distinct way, but close to that of Thompson, Raymond Williams questions the metaphor "base-superstructure" of structuralist Marxism, which states a primacy of "economy" in relation to "culture" or "ideology." The subject is explored in his essay "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" (WILLIAMS, 2005).

environment favorable to it. Consequently, the industries and talents who are attracted and arrive in the city reinforce its creative basis, in a positive cycle" (REIS e URANI, 2011, p. 32). Of the various approaches and definitions of "creative city", Reis and Urani found three elements that are preponderant for the constitution of a creative city: (i) innovations, in economic, social, cultural, or even environmental terms; (ii) connections; and (iii) culture, be it strict cultural content (products, services, material and immaterial heritage, demonstrations of unique character), the presence of creative industries in chain, the "added value" to traditional sectors, and, lastly, the formation of a creative environment capable of offering the coexistence of various demonstrations (especially artistic), that are mutually inspired.

Although we recognize this approach's differential as a recognition of cultural relevance and sociability networks in the cities, the notion of creative city is still permeated by elements of "urban entrepreneurialism," that so strongly marks the idea of "competitive city," to the point of a certain economic instrumentalization of the creative potential (artistic or other) of a city.

- Smart Cities: maybe one of the concepts most broadly spread in public opinion, qualified by Jordi Borja as

  > (...) an advertising operation for companies or business groups to sell their 'technologies' to the ingenuity of national and local governments, while intends to convince its citizens to live in 'truly intelligent cities.' (…) The concept of "smart cities" is simply a ridiculous vulgarity specific only to advertising overtly at the service of unscrupulous companies with impressed clients facing the novelty of "technology."

Borja's sourness towards the concept may lie on the fact that the idea of "intelligence" highlighted here refers essentially to the adoption of resources and infrastructures that, in the end, depend on the supply (and, to great extent, management) of infrastructures to integrate information and communication technologies (ICTs), physical devices connected to the network (IoT), with the declared goal of optimizing the city's operations and services, and connecting with the citizens. The imagery of smart city was proposed, according to Timmeren, Henriquez, and Reynolds (2015, p. 15), as a "panacea for the urban issues (…) to make cities more, efficient, environmentally sustainable, economically attractive, and socially inclusive". Its applications encompass monitoring and management of traffic and transportation systems, energy, water supply and sanitation, as well as crime prevention and administration of systems of schools, hospitals, and other public services.

The association of city image to innovative technology and the discourse of efficiency as a pilar for sustainability has been seductive to public administrators of many municipalities around the world. The criticism to its adoption, apart from the advertising character (and business interests) denounced by Borja, is that the promised transparency and participation in based on ample proficiency in ICTs by citizens, and the ability of dealing with information sharing and real-time virtual communications. Otherwise, the tools of a smart city are turned into yet another factor of exclusion and segregation – which Timmeren, Henriquez, and Reynolds (2015, p. 99 – 109) call *digital divisions* and the formation of *elite enclave*. That is, the management of the urban territory and the provision of services becomes consequently dependent on educational and financial resources unequally distributed, contributing to incite, instead of attenuating, inequalities. Furthermore, the access to collected data seems to remain under the power of private companies, with little transparency, and some municipalities seem willing to give up public control and ample transparency as a possibility of generating business[5].

- Educating cities: the concept of educating city proposes an integration of social and cultural activities to favor the formation, promotion, and development of citizens, especially children and the young. The idea differs from the notion of "educational" cities, as it proposes they become educating when consciously assuming that intention. The expression was adopted in the I International Congress of Educating Cities, which took place in Barcelona, in 1990. In 2004, its fundamental principles were synthesized and updated in a document called *Charter of Educating Cities* (CENPEC, 2006). In its second article, the Charter highlights the commitment of signing cities to "promote education in diversity for understanding, solidary international cooperation and world peace" (Carta..., Art. 2), fight discrimination, favor

[5]In 2017, for instance, the then newly inducted mayor of São Paulo, João Dória Junior, promised to include in a municipal privatization program the Bilhete Único database managed by SPTrans (MACHADO, 2017).

> freedom of speech, cultural diversity, and dialogue, as well as contribute for the correction of inequalities "that then arise from cultural promotion, due to exclusively commercial criteria" (ibidem).

It is possible to notice an important emphasis change in relation to the previous concepts, not only in adopting other validation and valuation parameters (in words like "diversity", "dialogue"), but also in expressly tensioning the economic-bias approach, in reinforce cooperation (in opposition to the competitive approach) and the "correction of inequalities" resulting from what it calls "exclusively commercial criteria". Moacir Gadotti (2006) states that it is possible to speak of a city that educates when it seeks to establish full-fledged citizenship, providing permanent channels of participation and fomenting community organization. Nevertheless, the initiative seems to have had little dissemination beyond institutions linked to the educational field, being discussed mainly by government agencies or non-profit related to the theme.

- Resilient cities: resilience has been a favored theme in international debates regarding the response to climate changes, being therefore intricately linked to the environmental and sustainability agenda. However, while policies of response to climate events (floods, hurricanes and cyclones, "tsunamis") or other natural catastrophes (landslides, earthquakes, and others) have ample diffusion and application in the various government spheres and in the scientific and academic debates and social movements, the denomination "resilient city" is specifically linked to the action of "Resilient Cities Network", an international coalition of municipalities promoted by the leadership of the Rockefeller Foundation. The network was composed from the program 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) founded by the foundation in 2013, as part of its Global Centennial Initiative, whose investments enabled the admission of one director dedicated to the theme in each city, and access to a knowledge sharing networks, as well as the *pro bono* services of private companies and partner NGOs[6]. The network intends to promote a tripartite action between State (member municipalities), private sector, and the so-called Third Sector (encompassing both NGOs and organized communities). Albeit the main focuses are related to infrastructure (energy and sanitation, mobility, data), the coalition indicate the need for actions geared toward the overcoming of inequalities in the degree of vulnerability of black and brown populations in the territories that integrate the network, issue harshly brought to light by the 2020 pandemic.

- Healthy cities: as observed regarding the idea of "educating cities," the concept of "healthy city" is intrinsically linked to the debates deriving of public health policies. Evidently, the relationship between urbanization and public health has a longer history than this more specific one, dating from the nineteenth century. The Healthy City Movement, from which the concept derives, consists of a health promotion strategy with the goal of promoting better quality of life for the population (ADRIANO et al., 2000). The movement originated in Toronto, in 1978, when a planning committee defined public health as comprised of four main elements: human biology, the environment, lifestyles, and health services. This new guideline gained international expression in the following decade, until it was adopted by the World Health Organization and Pan American Health Organization (WHO/PAHO). According to Jaime Rabelo Adriano et. al. (2000, p. 54 – 55), a municipality is defined by PAHO as

  > that in which political and civil authorities, institutions and public and private organizations, owners, businesspeople, workers, and society devote constant efforts towards improving the populations' living, work, and cultural conditions; they establish a harmonious relationship with the physical and natural environment, and expand community resources to improve coexistence, develop solidarity, co-management, and democracy (OPAS, apud Adriano et. al.)[7]

WHO's guidelines for a city to become healthy include aspects pertaining to the physical environment, ecosystem, support and social participation, local economy, accessible health services, among other aspects. In the 1990s, the agenda of healthy cities arrived in Brazil, partly due to the promoting action by PAHO, but it became clear that the viability of the agenda remained subject to the oscillation of local governments' priorities on each occasion. Yet, for the purpose of this paper, it is worth highlighting the thematic comprehensiveness of the requirements for a

[6]Information obtained on the Network's website, available at: https://resilientcitiesnetwork.org/our-story/. Accessed on July 31st, 2021.

[7]OPAS 1996. *El Movimiento de Municipios Saludables*: una Estrategia para la Promoción de la Salud en América Latina, v. 96-14, April.

healthy city: the relation to multiple scales of reach (collective and individual) extrapolates the solely economic agenda, and focuses fundamentally on the collective rights agenda, and on aid policies for the population. At least on speech level, the guidelines for public policies are less instrumental than in the case of the "creative city," for instance.

The aforementioned relationship is evidently not – nor does it intend to be – exhaustive. But it seems sufficient to demonstrate the argument meant to be highlighted here: with every attributed adjective, a specific agenda, with its goals, priorities, and favored agents, is simultaneously imposed on the city. It is possible to assume that such multiplicity may mean a fairly complex challenge to local (or metropolitan) governments, whereby the choice of an agenda may relegate other policies which, from the point of view of the population as a whole, are not necessarily secondary: in declaring itself "creative," could a city place health policy in the background, for example? On the other hand, may a supposedly healthy city conciliate its goals with those of an "educating" city? Is it possible to comply with every agenda – in this case, what is the use of asserting itself in one way or another, beyond the interest in specific lines of fomentation or some type of publicity? In this sense, it is appropriate to inquire whether Jordi Borja is correct in referring to such adjectives as mere vulgarity of interests (BORJA, 2014).

The 2030 Agenda and the cities

Thus, we arrive at the 2030 Agenda and its own representations of the contemporary city. The so-called 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ratified in 2015 by the representatives of the 193 UN member States, is based on recognition of poverty eradication as the greatest global challenge, and a premise for sustainable development[8]. In this sense, the plan of action synthesized in the Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and respective 169 targets for poverty eradication and promotion of decent life for all in a manner compatible with the planet's ecological limits, is coherent with the entire consolidation history of the UN idea of sustainable development itself. Since the publishing of *Our Common Future* (1987) and, especially, the Rio Declaration on Environment (1992), the sustainability model is set on the economic growth, social justice and environmental protection. With the Final Declaration of the Rio+20 Conference, the formulation practice of targets, periodically negotiated among the member States, was established. The first experience in this sense arose with the institution of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), resulting from multilateral summits conducted throughout the 1990s. the Millennium declaration and the eight initial MDG were adopted by UN member States in 2000, with targets applicable until 2015. From 2010, the queries for the elaboration of the post-MDG agenda began.

The document *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted at the 2015 UN General Assembly, consists of a Declaration, a description of the 17 SDG and their 169 targets, a section on implementation and global partnerships, and even a guide for monitoring and revision. The 2030 Agenda consisted of the document that, for the first time, explicitly establishes a goal and related targets for urban development, and aligns with the so-called New Urban Agenda, established in 2016 in Quito (Ecuador) as a result of the III UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (III Habitat).

Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Settlements) proposes to "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (Transforming our world, 2015, p. 24-25), and its targets address: access to housing, slum urbanization, transportation (especially for people in vulnerable situations), planning and participatory management, cultural and national heritage, response to disasters, negative "per capita environmental impact of cities" (including air quality and waste), public spaces, links between urban, per-urban and rural areas, among other aspects. Out of the various themes comprised among Goal 11 targets, it is possible to find common terms with some of the aforementioned urban agendas, especially that of resilient cities, but also healthy and educating cities (regarding the promotion of social participation).

Since the 17 SDG are declared as indivisible, other agendas must be sought within other goals. Thus, the "educating city" also relates to Goal 4 (Quality Education) and, to a lesser degree, Goals 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). In a similar way, the "healthy city" is related to Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), as well as the aforementioned 10 and 16. The "creative city" has links to Goal 4, but mainly Goals 8 and 9

[8]As observações deste tópico se baseiam em informações obtidas na *Plataforma Agenda 2030.*

(respectively, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). The latter is the goal that is likely most linked to the agenda of "smart cities."

The "competitive city" is, at first glance, the least clearly identifiable with the SDG. The attainable approximation requires the admissibility of the basic assumption of "competitiveness," which is the hypothesis that promoting a favorable business environment for companies will result in job generation, revenue, and, therefore, reduction of poverty and inequality. Only from that starting point, it is possible to conceive the link to Goals 1 (No Poverty), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), eventually mediated by the targets corresponding to Goals 8 and 9 (those which most clearly relate to the economic scope of sustainable development).

Representation, representativeness

Another extent of representation is introduced with the acknowledgement, by the Resilient Cities Network, that vulnerability to natural disasters and sanitation crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic also encompass an important racial component, and with the emphasis given in the SDG (including Goal 11) to the care of people in vulnerable situations (amongst whom women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities are also mentioned). In this case, it is about a more explicitly political scope. In such case, the word must refer not only to the meaning of "symbolization," but also "making present." Raymond Williams (2015) recalls the application of the word representation (or its corresponding adjective, "representative") to designate one's competency to act in the name of someone else, while "popular representation" by means of a plea is effectively about making present the demands of a specific group, who may not consider themselves served by the group of "elected representatives".

In practice, it is possible to note that interests linked to most vulnerable people have found little representation space among political officials, so that, as in the British Parliament discussed by Williams, our Legislative (in its various federal spheres) "almost always is very 'irrepresentative' in terms of locality, gender, occupation, and age group" (WILLIAMS, 2015, p. 388). The struggle for more space in this power structure, so that the diversity of interests and fundamental necessities for the construction of a resilient city, or *healthy*, or *educating* (and even *creative*) are asserted, goes through broadening the array of social segments. Such broadening is the basis of the contemporary claim for *representativeness* (that is: the real ability of expressing oneself in the name of others).

The multiplication of specific social demands, which has characterized contemporary social movements and been sometimes stigmatized as "identitarianism" (HAIDER, 2019), results in the simultaneous expansion of demands society presents the cities, and to which the representations presented here may have had little to offer. It is not clear, for instance, how adhesion to the *smart city* may mitigate the effects of racial discrimination in the appropriation of urban space. In fact, the possibility of "digital enclave" formation even points in the opposite direction. On the other hand, if it is true, as stated by Richard Florida, that the creative city presupposes grater *tolerance* toward the presence of the LGBTQIA+ community, is it possible to say that the conditions of creativity flourishing are enough to ensure the safe fruition of the city demanded by women? An educating city intends to ensure the adequate development of youth and children, but what can it teach to assure the overcoming of the so-called *ableism*[9]?

Final considerations

The various issues addressed throughout this text are far from being answered, and this paper does not intend to offer a solution. The goal of the investigation of various forms of portraying contemporary cities was to highlight not only the complexity of current urbanization, but also to indicate a possible mismatch between the propositions made when it comes to cities as integral entities (thus the possibility of representation through adjectives, as if giving them humanized characters) and the demands of specific segments of the societies which compose them.

The apparent obviousness (a city is not a homogeneous and cohesive whole) cannot prevent the confrontation of the problematic relationship between totalizing

[9]Name given to the discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. It is grounded on the social construction of a standard body seen as "normal," leading to the underestimation of people's ability and aptitude due to their disabilities.

representations and segmented agendas. The partial realities cannot be silenced or minimized for not "representing the whole," as it has been often justified. At the same time, the continued fragmentation of agendas and demands has resulted in the inability of formulating an image capable of articulating and giving coherence to such agendas, rendering them relatively powerless in comparison to the action of segments that make use of totalizing representations, as imprecise and misleading as they may be. The hereby proposed queries compose a research program that intends to, at least, make the segments of the public who proposes them (even more) present, without speaking *for* them.

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