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معهد عصام فارس للسياسات
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SOCIAL JUSTICE & THE CITY | CONCEPT NOTE

Mona Favaz, Project Coordinator

Department of Architecture and Design

*Faculty Advisor, Social Justice & the City Project, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
American University of Beirut*

Project Vision and Statement

We live in times when violence, insecurity, exploitation and poverty have come to characterize the everyday experiences of the urban majorities (Simone and Rao 2012). Glaring inequalities -be they race, gender or class inequalities- are presented to us as normal and inevitable. Framed in the narrow yet hegemonic vocabulary of the market, the flagrant discrepancies between the lifestyles of the high-heeled elites and the “sans-parts” (Ranciere and Noudelmann 2003) or the “disenfranchised” (Bayat 2000), those who either struggle for survival or for the maintenance of a superficial integration in the material benefits of the system (Marcuse 2009), are simplified through a-political frameworks such as daily dollar spending, over-population, and unemployment. Aside from masking devastating relations of exploitation, these frameworks serve to maintain the dominance of the consumptive ideals that colonize the imagination of possible futures. They make it increasingly difficult to propose possible models of being together (Amin 2012) outside of the narrow confines of individualism.

In response to this reality, scholars have reacted with growing alarm. It is virtually impossible to count the number of papers that have documented in the four corners of the globe the staggering effects of what is widely defined as a “neoliberal” turn in the conception and understanding of models of government and societal organization (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 2005). Defined as a policy agenda that seeks to delegate to the market sectors of life that have until then been managed by the “social” or the “political” (Dikec 2006, Harvey 2005), neoliberalism combines a tool kit of interventions such as tax cuts, deregulation, privatization, trade liberalization, and insecure labor that provide incentives and flexibilities (or informal facilities) to facilitate the accumulation of capital. These are typically accompanied by a reversal of the “developmentalist” or welfare role of the state such in the provision of benefits such as social security, education, and healthcare spending (Harvey 2005).

Of particular interest to urban scholars, policy-makers, and activists is the changing role of local city authorities under the framework of neoliberalism. Despite important regional differences, it is possible to outline a global entrepreneurial turn where city authorities, seeking to attract investments to their jurisdictions, look at city spaces and urban services (e.g., infrastructures) as resources for

capital accumulation (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 2005). They hence reframe policy-making as strategies for articulating incentives to potential investors. While the forms and levels of informalization that these incentives take differ, as do the socio-political contexts in which they have been introduced, the policy recipes –particularly when they are fuelled by transnational actors such as development banks, aid agencies, or multi-national corporations- are increasingly similar (Roy and Ong 2011). The consequences of these policies have also been consistent across the globe: ever more exclusive urban developments, forced –sometimes recurrent- population displacements, closure of the commons, reduction of public spaces, reinterpretations of property regimes towards more exclusive and private developments, limited interventions in informal settlements in the form of titling rather than upgrading (Harvey 2005, Smith 2002, Shatkin 2004, Fawaz 2011). More generally, the “poor” remain “guests” in the city, admitted or tolerated in its quarters (Chatterjee 2004) while their efforts to hold grounds are criminalized and met with militarized reactions.

It is also worth dwelling a little on what has happened to the profession of urban planning. Once accused by Marxist scholars to mask classed conflicts in its strive for a peaceful being-together (Harvey 1985, Castell 1977), the profession seems to have evacuated much of its earlier commitments to social justice, as neighborhood upgrading type interventions are replaced by urban renewal projects. With the privatization of infrastructure, projects targeting the poor are now mostly concerned with re-engaging low-income population groups as possible clients, framing questions of service provision within the language of cost recovery and appropriate pricing (Huzchemeyer 2008, Bogaert 2012). Earlier traditions of equity and/or advocacy planning that recognized structural inequalities as an impediment to social/spatial justice (Davidoff 1965) have given way to “mediation” approaches where structural differences are “solved” through “discussion” (Healey 1992). Even when planners talk about social justice, a liberal framework seems to dominate the engagement – as typified, for instance, through recurrent models of the “just city” that *adopt* a liberal notion of justice while evading the fundamental questions of structure and access to modes of production, including land (Marcuse et al 2009).

Towards a Platform for Social Change

Given the weight of the evidence, we find it imperative to move beyond a critique that outlines the devastating effects of neoliberalism on cities and their dwellers. Instead, we propose that the role of current scholarship addressing the neoliberal turn is to articulate platforms of “being together”, arenas where investigations of the relationships between capitalism and urbanization, inequalities, and injustice can be linked to progressive agendas for social change. To this end, two resources are particularly important:

a. A rising climate of radical social mobilization with innovative and far-reaching –even if not widespread- propositions, proposes visions of how cities should be. Over the past decade, we have witnessed the rise of numerous social movements (e.g., the City Alliance in Brazil and the establishment of the Ministry of Housing in 2003, the Occupy Movement in the United States, the (for now largely failed) revolutions across the Arab world, and/or mobilizations for public space in Turkey, Greece, Lebanon) with variable degrees of success but nonetheless sustained efforts for change. Aside from local campaigns, these movements are currently drawing solidarities across regional and national boundaries. For example, a Right-to-the-City coalition now groups

organizations from various corners of the world that meet together to share their experiences in organizing and mobilizing for change.¹

b. A rich body of literature that has formulated since the 1970s strategies for thinking through Social Justice in Space/Spatial Justice (Lefebvre 1968, Harvey 1985, Castell 1979), thinking through the philosophical and social frameworks through which these proposals should be articulated. Over the last decade, dozens of edited volumes such as *Cities for People, Not for Profit*, or *The Right to the City* have proposed concrete visions for change that develop these proposals further.

There is also clear evidence that activists and scholars are working together. In perhaps the most inspiring of these partnerships, Marcuse (2009) goes beyond a punctual involvement to reflect, more generally, on the role and processes that scholars can adopt in a sequence of “expose, propose and politicize” that he describes as an adequate platform for partnering with existing social movements. It is in this context that the *Social Justice and the City* Project seeks to articulate a framework that combines active research and partnerships between scholars, policy-makers, and activists in Lebanon advocating for more inclusive cities.

Key elements of the Proposed Platform

The aim of the Issam Fares Institute’s *Social Justice and the City* Project is to formulate an agenda for research, mobilization, and policy advocacy that establishes a partnership between scholars, policy-makers, and activists in Lebanon (and beyond) working towards more inclusive cities. The project seeks to act like a platform where scholars, policy-makers, and activists can share reflections, experiences, and strategies (i) documenting, analyzing and reflecting on ongoing urban processes affecting the organization and life of the city, (ii) sharing and validating research with activists, affected communities, and other social groups who are potentially interested in sharing both the acquired competence and the pool of research tactics, and (iii) supporting and informing initiatives that hope to influence change through interventions such as publications, media appearances and/or open letters, policy debates, lobbying, and policy advocacy, etc.

A Basic Framework: The Right to the City

The platform articulates its agenda at the crux of two approaches or understandings of the *right to the city*. On the one hand, the “right to the city” provides the basis for legal claims made on behalf of population groups deprived of access to basic necessities –particularly shelter and urban services. Within a normative framework of *redistributive justice* where the notion of *access* is key; this formulation of the ‘right to the city’ decries the growing disenfranchisement of urban inhabitants in the context of contemporary neoliberal policy-making (Fawaz 2011, Friedman 1988, Harvey 2008, Isin 2000, McCann 2002 and 2003, Mitchell 2003, Purcell 2002 and 2003, Simone and Rao 2012). It seeks to counter these trends by reforming traditional models of public participation and/or state government to make them more inclusive by, for example, replacing national citizenship as a prerequisite for political participation by other forms of entitlement, such as inhabitance (Martin et al. 2003). Applied in the context of Western democracies, researchers are using the right to the city in order to react, for example, against the growing powers of multinational corporations and to argue for the need for forums where inhabitants are able to influence the decisions that big capital takes when it shapes their spaces (Martin et al. 2003, Purcell 2002). Similar arguments have been deployed in reference to urban planning reforms in lower-income countries, especially in Colombia and Brazil where more inclusive and participatory processes of planning are invoking the ‘right to the city’ in their formulation. The United Nations has also put forth a proposal for a ‘World Charter

¹ New York City, Nov, 2013, see www.rosalux-nyc.org

of the Right to the City' that relies on the legal system in order to secure inclusiveness in urban planning practices (Fernandes 2007) or, more generally, to promote a "rights-based" approach to the challenges of urbanization (UNESCO 2011).

On the other hand, a radical formulation evokes with the "right to the city" the theoretically complex and provocative formulation of Henri Lefebvre who sought to confront the hegemonic domination of the market with a political program aimed towards reviving the political dimensions of space both as the embodiment of previous struggles and as the enabler for the possibilities of future collective and individual social action (Dikeç 2001: 1790). More specifically, for Lefebvre (1968, 1974), the "right to the city" is a two-tiered political program that aims to strengthen the ability of 'city-zens' to take over processes of spatial production (Lefebvre 1968 and 1974, see also Dikeç 2001, Purcell 2002 and 2003) through (i) participation in the conception, design and implementation of the production of urban spaces and through (2) the appropriation — by access, occupation and use — of urban spaces according to the needs and aspirations of urban inhabitants rather than the rules of the market. In this radical critique of capital and its domination over processes of spatial production, the propositions of Lefebvre, as developed by Harvey and particularly Holston (2011) entails a confrontational stand that challenges the processes of capital accumulation centered around the valorization of urban space beyond its conceptualization as a commodity to be exchanged in the form of property (Purcell 2002: 101-103, Lefebvre 1974, Logan and Molotch 1987).

Although these two formulations of the 'right to the city' differ considerably, particularly in the way they conceive of "rights" (as claims forwarded to existing authorities or modes of undermining existing authority), they both serve the objective of the Issam Fares Institute's *Finding Justice in the City* Project to introduce the framework of the "political" in the conception and provision of everyday life in the city. In other words, the right to the city serves the purpose of introducing a discourse of "politics" through both the substance and process in which urban services are provided. In terms of substance, the two formulations speak to the "imperative" of going beyond the framework of the market in the allocation and organization of urban spaces —as shelter, recreation, play, or other. In terms of process, both frameworks appeal to and nurture a democratic imagination in which city dwellers can resort to a multitude of venues and strategies in order to express entitlement and dissent. It therefore recognizes political organization, including conflictive forms such as protests, sit-ins, temporary and permanent occupations of public and private space, and others as part of the strategies and approaches to shape the city (Routledge 2010).

It is on this imperative of the "political" that the Issam Fares Institute's *Social Justice and the City* Project focuses its energy and work, with the means and strategies available to a policy institute positioned in an academic framework to focus primarily on the reformulation of the questions that face our inequitable cities today.

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