

Atti della XXIII Conferenza Nazionale SIU - Società Italiana degli Urbanisti

DOWNSCALING, RIGHTSIZING. Contrazione demografica e riorganizzazione spaziale

Torino, 17-18 giugno 2021

23 LE POLITICHE REGIONALI, LA COESIONE, LE AREE INTERNE E MARGINALI

A cura di

Federica Corrado, Elena Marchigiani, Anna Marson, Loris Servillo

**Società italiana
degli urbanisti SIU**



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New encounters between human and more-than-human actors (viruses and bacteria included): vulnerability of cities and the (sub)urban future

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the debate about the future of the Planet has been challenged by the new climate and environmental crisis. Globalisation has been condemned as responsible for the Planet's decline.

In response, the political discourse on the link between the urban and the ecological question have increasingly dominated political agendas, worldwide, and interrogated the Urban Political Ecology (UPE) theoretical debate.

This paper digs into this debate with reference to the theoretical debate that calls into question the centrality of the Earth, of its ability to act autonomously. The background idea is that the terrestrial/earthling is no longer the scenario of human action, but it takes part in it as agent/actor of a new political interplay between geo-sphere, socio-sphere and biosphere. Accordingly, periphery is suggested as a "theoretical domain" where to explore new encounters between human and more-than-human actors (including the relationship between emerging forms of urbanization and the spreading of the infectious diseases) and rethink the "urbanisation of nature" thesis while refreshing the UPE debate which is more attentive to interactions along the urban periphery. More in general, the paper contributes to the theoretical debate on the (sub) urban future of the planet by questioning new political actors and arenas and establishing some basis for a future research agenda in this area.

Parole chiave: urban policies, climate change, ecology

1 | Premises

This paper introduces some critical reflections to address new 21st century planning issues in the face of the earth's climate, migration and urban crisis.

The text does not deal with a specific case study and does not claim to provide comprehensive answers to contemporary problems, nor does it intend to offer a toolkit to face the challenges of the new century. The argument here is to highlight the fertility of some approaches to urban and ecological policies, advanced in the last decades to reflect on the effects of socio-spatial and ecological transformation associated with the urbanization processes, in the face of contemporary challenges (Paba, 2019). The article therefore starts from the philosophical-political analysis of the context, the one made by Bruno Latour in his latest book (2017 - *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique*), to mark a crucial distinction between the poles, the Globe and the Terrestrial: «the Globe grasps all things from far away, as if they were external to the social world and completely indifferent to human concerns. The Terrestrial grasps the same structures from *up close*, as *internal* to the collectivities and *sensitive* to human actions, to which they react swiftly. Two very different versions of the way for these very scientists to have their feet on the ground, as it were» (Latour, 2017a: 66-67). Then it briefly drafts the contemporary socio-ecological question; finally it suggests an urban political ecology approach – from the perspective of the Terrestrial – as a key to address the planetary urban transformations and heal inequalities and marginalisation, to act in the global periphery, as well as to be prepared (or even anticipate) to the territorial and political management of the crises emerging from the encounter/conflicts between human and non-human actors, the spread of new viruses or other kind of diseases and the urban life, processes of modernization and rebirth of places, and so forth.

This contribution is just a first collection of notes not a more argued paper on this topic. The text makes extensive use of quotations. In this preliminary elaboration of the concepts, it was considered important to put the reader in a position not to misunderstand the thoughts of the quoted authors, leaving the task of making interpretative syntheses to future elaborations.

2 | Introduction: The return of the Earth e the new universality of the human condition

In Bruno Latour's book which I took as initial reference of this paper (*Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique*) the centrality of the Earth, of its ability to act autonomously, is the subject of a bio-political argumentation. According to Latour, the life of humans on earth is affected by three dynamics of upheaval, intertwined with each other: (1) climate change and the advent of a *Nouveau Régime Climatique* (climate is understood in the broad sense of the relations between human beings and the material conditions of their lives), (2) deregulation (and the advent of globalisation) and (3) the dizzying explosion of inequalities and amplification of human and non-human migrations (Latour, 2017a: 1-2; Paba, 2019). «We are in a condition of migration of ourselves from ourselves, of a crisis of belonging to the globe, to the world, to the provinces, to particular plots of ground, to the world market, to lands or to traditions» (ibid.: 16). The return of the Earth and the opening to the Earth mark the fundamental passage we are experiencing: «there is nothing more innovative, nothing more present, subtle, technical, and artificial (in the positive sense of the word), nothing less rustic and rural, nothing more creative, nothing more contemporary than to negotiate landing on some ground» (ibid.: 53). This statement paves the way for the awareness of the new role that humanity is called to play. It becomes part of either the construction or destroying of the globe. Globalisation perpetrated through plans for the modernization of rich countries – responding alternatively to free market logics and colonial models – is now going through a profound crisis. Countries that have forcefully imposed it onto countries that must today manage the consequences of this model and generated large migrations, are experiencing the same problems of the latter. Latour continues stating that «The soil of globalization's dreams is beginning to slip away. This is the truly new aspect of what is discreetly called the “migratory crisis” [...] the symptom, to more or less excruciating degrees, of an ordeal common to all: the ordeal of finding oneself deprived of land (ibid.: 4-6). The migration crisis is then generalized and constitutes the visible and urgent dimension of the need for change of a global crisis; it is the meeting point between divergent processes. Latour interpret this condition as the new (wicked) universality (or the universal lack of earth) of the human condition after globalization in its decadent meaning (univocal instead of plural, minus instead of plus) «for which instead of multiplying the points of view it has encouraged for development implemented so far» (ibid.: 5). Latour stated that the very notion of soil is changing as result of a different aspect of the same metamorphosis. Then there is no longer an assured “homeland,” as it were, for anyone, no escaping (or dream of escaping) is possible anywhere if this anywhere is no longer exiting. In Latour's words: “«either we deny the existence of the problem, or else we look for a place to land. From now on, this is what divides us all, much more than our positions on the right or the left side of the political spectrum. And this is just as true for the old inhabitants of the wealthy countries as it is for their future inhabitants» (ibid.: 5). This drives to the conclusion that old markers such as “Right” and “Left,” “liberation,” “emancipation,” “market forces”, or even the markers of space and time that have appeared self-evident for so long, such as “Local” or “Global,” “future” or “past” need to be rethought or even abandoned (ibid., 33). Countries that undertook modernization processes could place themselves on a vector that went from the local (to be modernized) to global (plus) where the Globe defined the scientific, economic and moral horizon, and condensed a reference at the same time spatial and temporal, as a synonym for wealth, emancipation, knowledge and so on. The problems arose as the global became *minus* global that only a few began to profit from. A process that has triggered the return to the *local-minus* (which has returned to attract by reaction) in the forms of protection, identity and certainty within national or ethnic borders towards the erosion of the soil on which to land for all. This is where the *Terrestrial* (the new political actor and attractor proposed by Latour) comes into play, that is a third attractor that absorbs and sucks up all conflicts and redefines the rules of the game adopted until now, «and it is at this point in history, at this juncture, that we find ourselves today. Too disoriented to array the positions along the axis that went from the old to the new, from the Local to the Global, but still incapable of naming this third attractor, fixing its position, or even simply describing it» (ibid., 32-33). The Terrestrial is no longer the milieu or the background of human action, instead, it participates fully in public life, reacts to human actions and does not constitute any longer the time and spatial reference of/ for human actions. Human and spatial geography are not distinguishable anymore. The Earth itself is not the stable background of the processes of modernization; it takes part of the history: “if the Terrestrial is no longer the framework for human action, it is because it participates in that action. Space is no longer that of the cartographers, with their latitudinal and longitudinal grids. Space has become an agitated history in which we are participants among others, reacting to other reactions. It seems that we are landing in the thick of geohistory” (ibid. 41-42). The Earth reacts to the human actions and humans are no longer the only actors. In the current era of the Anthropocene we are witnessing an upheaval involving the earth-

system where the action of human beings is no longer distinguishable from the framework that takes part in the action (Hamilton et al., 2015; Lenton, 2016).

3 | The contemporary geo-social question

The Modern / Terrestrial vector could become the new delimitation of conflicts or a credible political alternative beyond the logic of the right and the left (by now insignificant markers), beyond the utopias without "topos" (without land and without soil) of the Local, of the Global or even Out-of-this-world (as in the case of climate deniers). A vector that highlights the importance, necessity and legitimacy of belonging to a land without confusing this level with what the Local (as a reactive attractor / minus) has superimposed on this concept, i.e. ethnic homogeneity, authenticity, capitalization, thus distinguishing the return of the Earth from the back-to-the-land. Assuming the concept of terrestrial as a new horizon of politics implies rethinking the social question in terms of political ecology by renewing the ecologism that has not been able to take up the challenge of the great post-war transformation getting aligned or even intertwined with the debate on the XIX century social question (Polany, 1957). In the years of the "great acceleration" (Steffen et al., 2015) or the exponential growth of the influence of human activity on the planet, progressive or reactionary politics continue to be defined only on the basis of the vector of modernization. On the one hand, the social movement has not embraced ecological challenges; on the other hand, ecology has not been able to grasp alternative energies. Social conflicts and ecological conflicts have been kept distinct as if on the one hand there were pure and simple human beings and on the other non-human objects. However, it is now clear that the two issues are not separable. The error depends on the role that both have given to nature (Latour, 2017a; 2018). Indeed, it is certain that alliances cannot be made between political actors and objects outside society deprived of the power to act. A concept that Latour also addresses in his book "Face à Gaïa" (2015) examining the countless and ambiguous figures of Gaia to unravel the ethical, political, theological and scientific aspects that the now obsolete notion of Nature had confused, in search of a renewed universal solidarity. Due to the unforeseen effects of human history, what we called Nature now leaves the wings and takes the stage. The air, the oceans, the glaciers, the climate, the soil: everything we have made unstable interacts with us. The old Nature disappears and gives way to a being whose manifestations are difficult to predict: *Gaia*. The appeal here is to redefine the social question of the 21st century as a geo-social question enhanced with the new geopolitics and a serious modernization project that does not forget to anticipate the reactions of the terraqueous globe to human actions (as in the previous two centuries), and where the question of science becomes fundamental for the definition of the Earth and the New Climate Regime. Latour claims that «a certain conception of "nature" has allowed the Moderns to occupy the Earth in such a way that it forbids others to occupy their own territories differently [...] However, if we claim to be opposing "scientific rationality" by inventing a more intimate, more subjective, more rooted, more global – more "ecological," as it were – way of capturing our ties to "nature," we lose on both fronts: we will be left with the idea of "nature" borrowed from tradition while being deprived of the contribution of positive knowledge. We need to be able to count on the full power of the sciences, but without the ideology of nature that has been attached to that power» (Latour, 2017a, 64-65).

By bringing the attention back from "nature" to the "terrestrial" Latour suggests a repositioning of politics that has contributed to keeping social and ecological (on the basis of nature) struggles disconnected, since the emergence of the climate threat. Latour, therefore, suggests a shift from an analysis in terms of production systems (rooted in a division between human actors and their resources, namely the nature) to one in terms of engendering systems that involve and bring into confrontation actors (agents, animate beings) with distinct abilities and capacities to react, and where the role attributed to the human is dispersed, and the basic principle is the dependence for the other. The interest of a generative system is to engender terrestrials (not just human); then it's not focused on producing goods for humans on the basis of resources. It therefore assigns different functions to politics and reflects the very nature of the Anthropocene: «The earth system reacts henceforth to your action in such a way that you no longer have a stable and indifferent framework in which to lodge your desires for modernization. Despite all the criticisms to which the concept has been subjected, the prefix "Anthropos" applied to a geological period is indeed the symptom of a repoliticization of all the planetary questions» (ibid., 84).

4 | Urban Political Ecology for a repoliticization of the planetary question of (sub)urbanisation

A way to take the challenge of re-politicizing a certain kind of planetary questions such as urbanization, suburbanisation and post-urbanisation is engaging the existing literature on Urban Political Ecology (UPE) from the perspective of the Terrestrial. UPE literature has now existed for two decades (Swyngedouw, 1996). Political ecology is an interdisciplinary field engaged in the critical analysis of environmental issues,

that was recently re-given attention in the debate on the politics of climate change, and has been taken as a background of this paper (Keil 2011, Angelo and Wachsmuth 2014, Heynen 2014, Lawhon et al. 2014, Swyngedouw and Kaika 2014). UPE focuses on the urban and explores processes of urbanisation or “socio-nature” relationships with regards to urban environments (Swyngedouw 1996). The idea of interconnected and interrelated socio-natural urban processes, through a robust conceptualization of metabolism as a dynamic process to overcome the historically imposed separation between urban nature and urban society, goes back to socio-natural Marxian theory. In brief, key ideas of UPE relate to the belief that: «The environmental and social changes codetermine each other [...]; the type and character of physical and environmental change, and the resulting environmental conditions are not independent of the specific historical social, cultural, political, or economic conditions and institutions that accompany them [...]; processes of metabolic change are, therefore, never socially or ecologically neutral [...]; political-ecological perspectives seek to unravel the nature of the social relationships that unfold between individuals and social groups and how these, in turn, are mediated by and structured through processes of ecological change» (Heynen, 2017, pp. 8-9). Many streams of literature represent the different waves of UPE debate since its foundation (Gandy, 2002; Kaika, 2005; Keil and Desfor, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004; Keil, 2003, 2005). One of the most referenced contributions is an edited book by Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw (2006) entitled *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*. The authors of this book, engage with the politics of urban nature in more interconnected ways, while merging theoretical and empirical research.

Many efforts have been made for expanding UPE beyond its Marxist origins in order to increase the political relevance of UPE. For examples, important critiques that are central to a second wave of UPE scholarship include posthumanist perspectives (Latour and Holfield, 2009), as well as a critical urban theory perspective suggesting that UPE productively uses the concept of metabolism to reformulate the treatment of socionatures (Brenner, Schmid, 2011).

As Roger Keil contend «Perhaps we can submit in general terms that the point about UPE in contrast to many other theories and practical discussions of environments in cities, is that UPE is critical urban theory. It is not adding nature to a priori social constructions. Nature is the city. Nature is the urban [...]. The ‘complete urbanisation of society’ (Lefebvre, 2016: 121) is also connected to the complete colonisation of first nature as ‘[u]rbanisation extends to the countryside but is degraded and degrading’ (Lefebvre, 2016: 140). As a consequence, Lefebvre further argues, ‘[t]he flow of organic exchange between society and the earth [...] is, if not broken, at least dangerously modified [...]. In these processes of the destruction of nature through capitalist urbanisation and the simultaneous creation of new, mostly money-based metabolisms, rests the original motivation for UPE thinking» (Keil, 2020: 2360). According to Keil’s recent statement on an urban political ecology for a world of cities, we can initially differentiate three larger streams in critical UPE. The first is carried on by scholars engaged with the planetary urbanisation discourse and proposes the overcoming of the methodological “cityism” for a truly urban political ecology in order to fulfil the Lefebvrian promise and then contribute to a planetary, ecological, political understanding of contemporary urbanization (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). The second stream advances the idea of a ‘situated’ urban political ecology nurtured by a «broader range of urban experiences to inform theory on how urban environments are shaped, politicised and contested» (Lawhon et al., 2014: 498 in Keil, 2020, 2361). The third stream submitted by Creighton Connolly suggests a new critical line of thinking on the ridge between the classical UPE and its contenders. «Connolly intends to show ‘not only how cities are produced through socio- natural metabolic flows originating ‘elsewhere’ but also that cities and their specific sociopolitical contexts and spatial configurations have strong implications for how these various non-human natures are urbanised’» (Connolly, 2019: 64 in Keil, 2020, 2361).

For sure, an urban political ecological perspective offers new insights to the urban problematic.

Precisely with reference to the debate on the contemporary forms of extended urbanization such as In-Between (Sievert, 2003), planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2011; 2014; 2015; Brenner 2014), suburbanization (Keil 2018a; b) a discussion has recently emerged on moving UPE beyond the city, i.e. towards an integrated political ecology of suburbanisation. Roger Keil, Maria Kaika, Yannis Tzaninis and Tait Mandler (2019), who embraced the idea that urban peripheries «need to be viewed as complex societal relationship with nature from which new dispositions for action may emerge» (Keil, 2018a, p. 152), addressed this debate.

UPE does actually examine the urbanization of nature as a dialectic process (Perrone, 2020). Rather than simply the manifestation of nature in the city (Connolly, 2018; Keil, 2018a), it explores the material and infrastructural connections forming the “socio-spatial continuum” between city and countryside (Kaika, 2005). As such, this debate has substantially influenced the understanding of the nature of urbanization,

the situated practices of actors that constitute cities and their everyday socio-political geographies¹. The debate achieved this goal building on the concept of socio-natural metabolism introduced by Swyngedouw (1996) and inspired, as said, to the Marxian political ecology.

The notion of metabolism is indeed key to UPE's definition of the city and bypasses the idea itself of the border between the city and nature, counterposing to it the idea of interconnection between the two realms (Heynen et al., 2006). Accordingly, the city is conceived as «a sub-system located within a larger socio-spatial system, for example an urban region, which are linked through various socio-natural metabolisms» (Keil and Macdonald, 2016, p. 1518). More specifically, “Particular place-based metabolic relationships are embedded and constituted by external scalar and topological relationship that define the metabolism in a particular region [...]. But those metabolisms have to be stabilized and reproduced through local action under regional regulation” (Keil, 2018, pp. 152-3).

Moreover, the dialectical relationship between city and countryside is crucial to urban political ecologists' conceptualization of cities as, in Swyngedouw's words (1997, pp. 329), «a giant social process of perpetual transformation of nature». An interpretation inspired by Bill Cronon's (1991) book, *Nature's Metropolis* (although not a UPE book per se) that asserts that urban and rural landscapes are not separated but rather create and transform each other's environments and economies.

Defined as such, the UPE debate on (sub)urbanization seems to offer a fertile theoretical field within which to position, operationally, the concept of in-between city as a domain that originates new socio-natural metabolisms across traditional disciplinary boundaries. It makes thus possible retheorising the city and its environs (for example the region) as a product of metabolic processes of socionatural transformation in an era of extended urbanisation.

In this line, Keil and Macdonald (2016) have recently argued that the UPE lens is useful for examining the metabolic constellations generated by suburbanization across different spatial scales and for enabling conceptualizations of the city as a subsystem located within a broader urban region. They argue this with reference to the case of urban greenbelts (echoing the city/nature In-Between) to clarify how nature, in the form of the urban environment, has become a key component of urban policy tools which are used to control the form and extent of urban-regional development.

The question now is how might one imagine an urban political ecology for the age of planetary urbanisation (Keil, 2020) challenged by a “new climate regime” and respondent to a new attractor that changes and moves towards the terrestrial, the political delimitation of conflicts. As early as the seventeenth century, when economists began to take “nature” into account, they took it as a mere and external “factor in production,” indifferent to our actions. Moreover, as Latour states, for ecological parties «the term “nature” is meant as the nature-universe seen from nowhere that is supposed to stretch from the cells of our bodies to the most distant galaxies [...]: “That's too far away; it's too vague; it doesn't concern us; we couldn't care less” [...]. Such is the result of the confusion between the planetary vision and the Terrestrial. It is about the planetary vision that one can say, considering things “from above,” that it has always varied and that it will outlast humans, making it possible to take the New Climatic Regime as an unimportant oscillation. The Terrestrial, for its part, does not allow this kind of detachment. Thus, it is easy to understand why it is impossible to offer a very precise description of conflicts over attachment to land and why one must learn to demystify the notion of “nature” » (Latour, 2017, 72-73).

Urban political ecology, in its recent and reloaded debate offers an interesting side to interpret the new delimitation of conflicts as proposed/placed by Latour (the Terrestrial as a political actor, and beyond the markers of the old front of modernization: local, global, right, left, etc.), and therefore define new domains of action for urban policies often visible at the periphery of the globe. This delimitation calls into question and politicizes new encounters between human and more-than-human actors and rethink the “urbanisation of nature” thesis while refreshing the UPE debate. This addresses a research focus on the relationship between emerging forms of urbanization and emerging infectious diseases with reference to the role of shifting urban-ecological relationship (socio-ecological factors affecting infectious diseases emergence), governance dynamics rescaling, infrastructures, vulnerability of the massive expansion of the global urban fabric. Three key-areas of related research should include: mobility/migration and demographic change, infrastructure and governance. Moreover, as socio-environmental change – including deforestation and climate change – has becoming key risk factor which could lead to the

1 As such, UPE has always been a robust conceptual tool to interpret the urbanization process and the “explosion” of urban societies, that is also a highly uneven and socially unjust process which reinforces class divides and power relations (Connely, 2018; Lefebvre, 2003; Scott and Storper, 2015).

emergence of new epidemics, these topics should also form the basis of future research (Connolly, Harris Ali, Keil, 2020).

More in general, the paper shed a light on debate on the (sub) urban future of the planet by questioning new political actors, and the effects of capital accumulation processes.

Much theoretical research is needed in this direction which for now is proposed as an initial intuition and suggests the construction of an epistemological bridge between disciplines and approaches.

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