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The contemporary city  
and the urban unreal:  
São Paulo  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Fall Semester

## **The contemporary city and the urban unreal: São Paulo in the 21st century**

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### Mental life in the metropolis

At the beginning of the 20th century, Georg Simmel published one of his most important and well-known texts, “The metropolis and mental life”. He focused on the changes he observed in the relationship between spatial configuration and society (and other forms of sociability) within the urban landscape of the emerging *big cities* (or metropolises), namely, Berlin at the turn of the 19th century. When he published his essay in 1903, the metropolis was a recent occurrence signaling the beginning of a new urban phenomenon. It was brought about by the advances of industrialization and capitalism which, subsequently, would permanently change the physical configuration of cities and alter their economic, social and cultural significance. Simmel lived through Berlin’s great transformations from the second half of the 19th century onward and he described the birth of the modern city with singular clarity, seeking to demonstrate how the make-up of the *big city* would radically transform the relationship between individuals and society. In the modern metropolis, the accelerated flow of information and activities - in synchronicity with the mechanic speed of the industrial

revolution - would increase the pace of individuals. The result was the development of social relations which were less reliant on traditional historical or cultural codes of behavior. Simmel called this behavior “blasé”; it distanced citizens from the associations and obligations which are characteristic of social relationships in small towns. Within the rationale of modern capitalism, this type of behavior increased human productive efficiency in the urban environment. Furthermore, given the diversity clearly in evidence in big cities, the rules for controlling groups of citizens were diluted, resulting in greater individual freedom and conducts which diverged from conventional behavior.

Simmel's writings greatly influenced much of the theoretical production of the 20th century in urbanism and urban sociology, in particular, derivations of his theories developed by the Chicago School in the United States. In Brazil, his influence is felt in the authors who formulated the so-called “Brazilian explanations” of the 1930s. For example, Gilberto Freyre and Sergio Buarque de Holanda, who are indispensable for understanding the make-up of a Brazil striving to become a modern nation.

A century after its initial publication, the interest in Georg Simmel's work seems not to have abated. For example, relatively recently, David Frisby and Mike Fatherstone translated some of Simmel's most significant texts into English, published in a book entitled “Simmel on Culture” (Simmel, 1998). In this publication, Frisby and Fatherstone complement these translations with critical essays and show that current readings of Simmel's work seek new interpretations regarding the troubled relations between man and the contemporary metropolis.

Of course, the 21st century metropolis differs from Berlin in the 1900s. Nevertheless, they share economic, social and cultural structures, as well as new forms of representation, production and subjectivation - some of which articulate the ideas of a *real urban* space and an *unreal urban space*. The aim of this essay

is to reflect on the current relations between the real and unreal urban space in the biggest Brazilian metropolis: São Paulo.

## A return to the cities

There were many expectations regarding the metropolis, or modernity, which seem to have faded after the Second World War, all the more so in Europe, the original locus for the development of large cities, metropolitan urban life and the main academic frameworks for studying urbanism. Massimo Cacciari (2004), in his book “*La città*”, highlights the fact that the city of “communion and communication” and of “shared communal spaces” is “destroyed by the double impetus of industry and the market, giving rise to the metropolis (Cacciari, 2004). According to the Italian philosopher, the large cities which emerged from the process of industrialization suppressed the forces of socialization present in the traditional cities which existed up to the 19th century. In this context, the *leitmotif* of the forms of spatial and social organization of industrial cities was no longer the development and consolidation of solid community structures, but the market and production. The historical construction of the city as a social and cultural process is completely destroyed by the modernization process reinforced by the techniques which emerged with industrialization.

Cacciari is not unique in conceiving large industrial cities in this way. These reactions have emerged and developed alongside the growth of cities during the 19th and 20th centuries (Calabi, 2008; Mumford, 1968; Sica, 1996) . However, it is only in the second half of the 20th century that models providing an alternative to urban expansion based on the logic of industry and production have a wider impact on urbanism - even influencing *Modern urbanism* which saw industrialization as having the potential for creating new urban scenarios, distinct from and

better than those of pre-industrialization cities. The movement towards a return to the city sought to preserve the cultural and formal values of the historical areas of cities, almost always restricted to their central areas.

The publication of “The Heart of the City” by the 1951 CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture), which focused on the urban regeneration of historical city centers, signaled the beginning of a change in the direction of theoretical Modern urban development models. In 1956, during the 10th CIAM, effective proposals were drafted with regard to urban issues specific to central areas, such as proposals for the preservation of pre-existing cultural and identity values and the re-integration of urban functions which had become redundant, as well as the recovery of smaller scales such as the street and the neighborhood. Thus, a new generation of architects and urban planners, including the members of the Team 10 group, emphasized the need for changing the focus of their professional activities, as well as advocating more openness and plurality within CIAM. They argued that architecture and urban planners should be open to extra-disciplinary issues, in particular to questions relating to cultural forms of expression and the social problems of urban life. It is worth remembering that in addition to the criticism Modern models of urbanization received, links between industry and the city were also weakening. From the second half of the 20th century, new techniques associated to production, mobility and trade diluted the existing links between industrial production and the city, in particular in the *big cities*. During the 1960s, a few years after the 10th CIAM, the concepts and ideas developed by scholars such as Jane Jacobs, Aldo Rossi and Rob Krier reinforced the movement for a “return to the cities”, both with regard to historical forms and understanding the real cultural and social aspirations of citizens. Thus, a new form of understanding urban development and its relationship

with the history of cities was taking place. It had repercussions across the whole world and, to a large extent, still influences important contemporary urban interventions.

The theoretical foundations developed in the 1960s evolved during the subsequent decades and were applied to a variety of interventions both at the level of the building and at the urban level. However, it is only in the 1990s, alongside the evolution of *advanced capitalist* models and globalization, when emblematic examples of these theories emerged and resulted in new methods for understanding and intervening in the urban fabric. The economic globalization process and the establishment of a *Global System* accelerated during the last decade of the 20th century, producing new forms of imperialist exploitation and structural dependency, significantly impacting on the ways of organizing and conceiving the contemporary city (Harvey and Smith, 2005; Wallerstein, 1979). In a world interconnected by evolving information and communication technologies (ICT), cities became part of a global system of relations where physical and territorial limits are concealed, bringing to evidence phenomena such as social and spatial hybridity, heterotopia and a multiplicity of regional and international connections and interconnections (Harvey, 1998; Sassen, 2001; Virilio, 1991). Initially, the urban changes resulting from this process pointed toward an ideal democratic city, managed with the support of new technologies which would allow for increased popular participation. However, the opposite has been the case. Cities have followed the path laid down by the neoliberal economic system of which they are part. In addition, given their enormous power of economic persuasion, the monopolies formed by transnational corporations control the bureaucratic systems of management and urban development. This has resulted in an increase in social inequality, the control of public by private interests and spatial stratification (Davis, 2007; Harvey and

Smith, 2005). Furthermore, these unplanned and shapeless *de-territorialized* cities have led to socio-cultural relations being undermined and have resulted in new mechanisms for segregation, acting both in space and society (Santos and Marques, 2002).

Simmel's metropolis is no longer a novelty. If at the beginning of the 20th century there were few cities with over a million inhabitants, today they number over five hundred, of which approximately 30 have over 10 million inhabitants - the so-called megacities. However, no solutions have been found to the problems presented by the critics of the industrial city and attempts to *return to the city*, in evidence since the second half of the 20th century, have not been entirely successful, at least not in comparison to the traditional types of city and urbanity. Are there new forms of real and unreal urbanity and socialization in contemporary cities (or megacities)?

## The city of São Paulo

São Paulo provides us with many examples of the impasses which resulted from the rapid urbanization process undergone by some cities in the 20th century. Its urban population grew from 47,697 inhabitants in 1900 to 11,244,369 in 2010. It went from a small city to a megacity in less than a century.

The Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser was particularly interested in analyzing the unique urban conditions presented by São Paulo, where he lived for 32 years. According to Flusser, the physically dispersed and fragmented structure of the city, together with its imprecise forms of social and cultural expression differentiated the largest metropolis in South America from more traditional conceptions of the city. Flusser argued that São Paulo was a *urban conglomerate*, or a settlement and not a city within the molds of western culture (Freitag, 2002). In contrast

to the conflicts between tradition and modernity observed in the European industrialization process and the establishment of its bourgeoisies, in São Paulo, the new industrial society - made up of immigrants of different origins together with a diverse local population - emerged at a very fast pace taking over a vast and unstructured landscape.

According to Flusser, normally the concept of city implies a historical and social process compatible with “civilized” forms of urban living, where the physical space is made to fit the classic forms of representation, expression and experience which occur at the private, political and cultural level.

The metropolis of São Paulo was not governed by the “codes” in force in traditional cities, but, according to Flusser, it had other attributes and characteristics. São Paulo - new and original when compared to the European or American models - developed “new codes” which were a result of its ethnic, cultural and social diversity, molded by the process of late industrialization and urbanization. The incomplete state of its urban structure and spaces for urban living facilitated the acceptance and the development of innovative forms of citizen subjectivation (Flusser, 1992). Thus, the absence of strong cultural roots, a characteristic of São Paulo society, fostered development, and the acceptance and establishment of non-conventional urban forms of living – different both from the classic examples of western culture, and other important Brazilian cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Salvador which, although distinct from European models, still conformed to codes of practices and means of expression similar to those of European tradition.

In addition, Flusser also believed that the “new codes” operating in São Paulo were the result of the development of information and communication technologies and their new languages transmitted via *software* and *hardware*. In the absence of adequate urban spaces for the survival of the “old codes”, the



city became more open: a place where new linguistic tools were accepted and able to evolve, leading to the emergence of its own forms of cultural expression. These characteristics, facilitated by the city's unique ethnic and cultural heterogeneity, fostered the establishment of a new civilization - of "*neuen Menschen*" - free from the ties and precepts of the old world (Flusser, 1992).

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Thus, São Paulo can be understood as an unreal city, essentially because it is not conceived from the point of view of what actually exists - its physical spaces or urban conditions - but by its *possibilities* - the cultural, social and economic expectations within the city both at a local and global level.

However, this idea does not adequately express the recent urban movements São Paulo has experienced which seem to demand a real urbanity - a *return to the city* - whilst not foregoing its achievements which go beyond the *physical aspects* of its territoriality. These movements emerged mainly associated to an increase in the income of the poorer populations who have benefited from the income distribution policies of recent years. This is evident both in the recent changes in the demographic structure of the city and the means of cultural and social expression. Both these phenomena use the city as a means of expression and subjetivation, regardless as to whether they are demands or other forms of expression. For example: i.) the changes in the flow of demographic growth, leading to a decrease in the suburban population and an increase in the population of the central neighborhoods; ii.) the protests which took place in July 2013, whose main motives were urban problems such as mobility; iii.) an increase in collective and artistic activities using the city as a means of expression, in theatres, urban celebrations (such as street carnivals), large

events (Gay Pride, the Virada Cultural - an all night cultural event) and in the recent phenomena of the so-called “rolezinhos” (a meeting, arranged via social media, of thousands of young people from the suburban areas, in places frequented by the middle and upper classes, such as shopping malls in prized neighborhoods).

Thus, the “new codes” Flusser referred to should be understood in light of the changes recently experienced in the *real city*.

There seems to be a need for parity between the advances which occurred at the immaterial level and those associated with the material urban life.

## The post-metropolis

When Simmel identified a society in transformation, and a new urban behavior in Berlin at the start of the 20th century, his model city had just over one million inhabitants. Many terms and a considerable number of different analyses have been developed since that first moment. The contemporary metropolis has a different size and format, different economic and productive systems, other priorities and new social and environmental commitments which are interconnected and located between the real and the *unreal*. However, these “new” elements seem to survive alongside older human aspirations, influenced by history, culture and the understanding of their relations with space.

Although the developments in ICT - so highly acclaimed during the 1990s as a sign of man’s de-territorialization - are important to the contemporary metropolis in all areas of the world, they have not totally changed our relationship with the territory. As Massimo Cacciari (2004) observes, the de-territorialized post-metropolis is the denial of the city and urbanity, at least in the form idealized by western culture.

However, the heartbeat of megacities such as São Paulo is the dynamics which operates between the *real* and the *unreal* spaces, allowing for endless possibilities which can overcome the limitations present in its singular physical spaces. To think about the urban in these specific conditions seems to be the great challenge of the next decades.

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