

# Peripheral Living in the Post-Urban Era: from Humiliation to the Struggle for Social Justice

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## Abstract

Peripheral living in cities around the world often takes the form of neglect and humiliation with a lack of material resources. This phenomenon affects a significant percentage of the world's population and is destined to grow. Peripheral living, a "grey zone" of the "urban sea", is demarcated from the main institutions and is often seen as an undifferentiated space: included and excluded by the institutions; and included in and excluded from citizenship. In many cases the inhabitants on the periphery of cities and *megacities* are viewed as dangerous, delinquent, and incapable so the society that counts strives to protect itself by building lines of demarcation and urban fences. In the past, cities were founded with city walls for defence against possible external threats while today these boundaries have been replaced by internal limits that separate the urban area into zones reflecting the hierarchy of power. In this article I intend to provide an interpretation of peripheral living from the viewpoint of the social, cultural and political problems which cause the diverse types of deprivation and misrecognition towards the "inhabitants of the periphery". In my analysis of this negativity, I will discuss the strategies which peripheral communities implement in the struggle for recognition of their rights, for dignified and humane living, for social justice and to be recognised as capable of achieving personal fulfilment.

**Keywords:** Peripheral living, Megacities, Boundaries, Misrecognition, Commoning

## 1. Introduction

The rise of the global market with the expansion of *megacities* has profoundly transformed natural and urban landscapes by nurturing the progressive growth of settlements causing the erosion of fertile land and the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity. According to UN data, by 2050 at least 70% of the global population will

live in cities. The exodus and migratory flow from the countryside, from the hills and mountains towards densely populated urban areas is destined to continue. With the expansion of cities the peripheries are growing. These areas often house millions of people struggling to exercise their rights and existing without basic services such as education and medical care besides being misrecognised as capable persons and in their way of life. In the face of such injustice individuals constitute communities that gain awareness of their material and social living conditions leading to forms and strategies of struggle. The communities are established on a common basis (*commoning*) and communicate through the creation of “communal spaces” which become bridges between people of different political, cultural or religious backgrounds. These communal spaces are like “thresholds”, allowing the differences to meet, facilitating the start of a differentiated “we” which is indispensable in a fight for common objectives.

## **2. Urban living in the post-urban era**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries increasing industrialisation attracted significant migration resulting in industry-cities. This tendency continued into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with labour force movements from the Southern hemisphere towards the industrialised cities in the North. In recent decades, however, the migratory flows have no longer followed the same pattern. For some time now, as Alberto Magnaghi observes, there is “a double *territorial decentralisation*: firstly, *regional*, where the productive decentralisation and the molecularization of big industry has led to a territory with “sprawling towns” which destructively invade the countryside and “urbanise” vast regional areas; secondly, *global*, implying a move of the global productive cycle from the North to the South East of the world causing forced urbanisation, mainly from international migration, of millions of agricultural workers” (Magnaghi, 2020, p.71).

Commercial and production changes cause profound urban transformations: it is the end of the industrial city and with it the traditional town characterised by certain distinctive features. A powerful process of deterritorialization starts where inhabitants are separated from the historical and cultural heritage of their local environment. Regardless of their location, towns and cities all look alike and share architectural structures which are totally decontextualised and devoid of local historical connections. All these features are characteristic of the “post urban” era.

The “post urban” represents the cancellation of identifiable features of cities with deterritorialization and the disintegration of urban areas: like strands built up areas spread along coastal regions and rivers, and in the valleys stretching into lowland

areas, wherever possible. Riverbeds are narrowed with streams channelled underground and roads, seaside bathing resorts, pavements, restaurants and hotels form embankments along coastal areas. The boundaries between towns and the countryside give way to the spread of urbanisation characterised by construction homogeneity which is a common feature of urban settlements worldwide. The homogenization of the land is dictated by a mindset that asserts a certain way to build, plan and organise space.

Salvatore Settis states that a global urban model is establishing itself with “three converging characteristics: - the verticalization of architecture; - the megalopolis, cities without limits (*urban sprawl*); - new intraurban boundaries (*new urban divisions*), where the better-off live in safe, “modern” zones while the less fortunate are relegated to urban ghettos, *slums* and increasingly impoverished neighbourhoods” (Settis, 2017, p. 95). Urban sprawl is characterised by internal boundaries that often symbolise the division between civilised living and chaos, between legality and illegality, culture and subculture, development and underdevelopment etc. In certain cities in Africa, Latin America and Asia an extremely high percentage of the population of the megacities, up to 30-35% of the population, lives in *slums*, *favelas*, *bidonvilles* and shanty towns. In these poor, dangerous areas living conditions are degraded and insanitary with high rates of disease and criminality. The different forms of exploitation of the labour force in factories by Western and Asian multinationals and corporations together with mechanised farming methods have led to the loss of self-sufficiency of the local populations marking the shift from poverty to “mass misery” (Morin, 2016, pp. 61).

### **3. The divided city: *gated community* and peripheral community**

The sprawling city fuels peripheral living or “grey zones” which arise where the land was once fertile or in urban areas that is no longer of value for the property market. People with hopes and a strong desire for self-fulfilment and those looking for a better life and opportunities flock to these areas. However, many fall into misery, deprivation, emotional stress, loss of references, violence, exclusion and humiliation. A lot of cities are internally divided by walls built to separate, contain, isolate and to marginalise those people considered “losers”, “defeated by life”, “incapable”, or idle and dangerous criminals. “The city expands devouring the countryside but, at the same time, it fragments creating two contrasting and complementary formations: the *favela* and the *gated community*. The walls of the city become walls in the city. According to United Nations data, a seventh of the world’s population, about one billion people, today live in *bidonvilles* or *shanty towns* which do not deserve to be

called cities; in some countries (such as Ethiopia and Uganda) the “cities” are 90 percent made up of *slums*” (Settis, 2017, pp.74-75)

Wealthy neighbourhoods, the *gated communities*, are protected by insurmountable city walls with barbed wire and armed guard surveillance. These *gated communities* pursue the idea of building themselves a sort of “perfect community”. If, once upon a time, the utopian ideal of a city aimed at justice, equality, well-being and happiness for all its inhabitants, the *gated communities*, on the other hand, represent a perfect community for a privileged few. As stated by Settis, the term *privatopia* has been adopted to indicate this type of community. A *Privatopia* project “(quite the opposite of utopian) aims to control the living space ensuring the quality of services and protection from incursions of “others” (immigrants, the poor ....)” (p. 75) from the so-called peripheries. In the areas and neighbourhoods of the excluded, the marginalised and the worthless according to the society that counts, other communities emerge. Individuals united in their need for survival, the rituals, beliefs and symbols of their culture, as well as existing connections, organise themselves into communities. These communities use communal spaces to meet, demonstrate and stake claims thus developing a “commune” (*commoning*).

In Africa, Latin America and in many cities in the Southern hemisphere “the roads in urban areas are transformed into crucial sharing spaces providing not only the ground, but also the emblematic images that represent, support and reproduce behaviours, habits and forms of communication” (Stavrides 2022, p 133).

#### **4. Misrecognition of capabilities and peripheral living poverty**

The living crisis reflects the social crisis and vice-versa. They go hand in hand. Social injustice, inequality and social differences lead to miserable and inhumane living without dignity. Such forms of dwelling, in turn, cause extremely serious social crises. The governments of wealthy nations ignore these situations in the same way as reason ignores subconscious desires. Their public policies tend to be restricted to dealing with the superficial symptoms rather than focusing on the root causes which generate misery and desperation. With regard to the millions of people who find themselves living in Dante’s most desperate and inhumane circles, governments, supported also by the powerful elements in the global economy, ignore the mobilization of the less affluent in society by implementing a policy of *misrecognition* on various levels: from civil and social to political.

Civil misrecognition means that the concrete possibilities of an individual to exercise their civil rights as stipulated in their nation’s Constitution are not recognised.

Millions of people, mainly living in the world's cities and *megacities'* peripheries, have no way of exercising their rights or exploiting their freedom because they are excluded from education, with no internet access or professional opportunities, as well as having no financial backing or access to bank loans etc. Social misrecognition results in the exclusion from social services and the possibility to play an active role in society. The misrecognition of political rights deprives individuals of the chance to exercise their political rights. All these forms of misrecognition profoundly affect a person's emotional, sentimental and intellectual life; they influence an individual's sense of trust, approval and self-esteem. They trigger feelings of frustration, humiliation and desperation which are common sentiments amongst the whole community. But in many cases, according to Axel Honneth (1992), these feelings cause such a profound and strong sense of indignation that individuals and the community are driven towards a struggle for recognition.

The living crisis, thus that of cities, constitutes the litmus test in order to understand the problems of society. Social inequalities correspond to the arrangement of living spaces. The differences do not only stem from the enormous diversity in income which characterises the inhabitants of the various areas of a city, but also from the wide gap that separates those who have, from those who do not have, *capabilities* at their disposal, in other words, access to services, social structures and resources, the right to exploit their capabilities and opportunities.

Amartya Sen claims that liberty invests both the *processes* that "allow free actions and decisions and the real *possibilities* that human beings have in given personal and social conditions. Lack of freedom can derive both from inadequate processes (like the denial of the right to vote or other political and civil rights) and from the fact that some people are not given adequate opportunities to satisfy their basic needs (including lack of food, premature death, avoidable diseases or involuntary hunger)" (Sen, 2010, p. 23). Lack of liberty and *capabilities* result in a form of living characterised by material, spiritual and cultural deprivation. This is local *de-humanized* living. Zygmunt Bauman observes that anonymous, supranational economic and financial forces exert pressure so that individuals are denied the freedom to move, migrate or live elsewhere. In this state of deprivation their living takes the form of detention camps where exceptional destitution becomes the norm, in other words a "normal" form of living (Bauman, 2010, p. 85)

Deprived living offers only a future of limited opportunities because people are denied *capabilities* and therefore the chance to choose a lifestyle which fulfils their wishes and expectations. Being denied the ability to access fundamental resources

such as education, medical care, nutritious food supplies, clean water, a healthy environment, protected stable employment and the internet leads to inequalities which profoundly and negatively affect the quality of living and a person's well-being and their expectations. Such deprivations affect the most fragile and vulnerable of the poor population: women, children and the disabled (M. Nussbaum, 2001).

The lack of income does not constitute a sufficient explanation for inequality since it often stems from the deprivation of ability and a state of illiberal living. Sen states that the poverty of degraded living needs to be considered not only as a lack of income, but also, and above all, as deprivation of fundamental freedom, lack of rights to access capabilities as an impediment to an individual's ability to realise a fulfilling and worthwhile life.

### **5. Common spaces and the struggle for a humane form of living**

In the poorer neighbourhoods and in the peripheries the inhabitants organise themselves in democratic movements to manifest their discontent and to put forward legitimate demands. Such movements also exist to fight the appropriation of natural resources or to obtain access to basic goods and services or to show their disapproval of the various social injustices. They constitute real communities where individuals freely discuss issues and problems as well as the objectives and strategies to adopt as a movement. Political matters are debated and transformed. These communities frequently come up against opposition on the part of the ruling institutions which aim to contain, marginalise and interrupt the network linking the movements. In addition, the objective of the institutions is to establish a process of *normalisation* to render the movements' actions harmless. The communities are formed because they have something in common (*commoning*): energy, time, material and cultural resources, spaces and objectives etc. Stavrides in *Common Space. The City as Commons* states that "the process of redefinition is always a process of both material and immaterial transformations. Giving a new meaning to existing practices and resources becomes as important as inventing new practices" (Stavrides, 2022, p. 55). Newcomers contribute to this revision and transformation. In this way *commoning* contrasts the dangers, to which it is continuously exposed, of homogenisation and consensus stagnation, and of normalisation. Normalisation, he claims, consists in channelling behaviour "towards prevailing power relations" (p. 74). It is fundamental that the communities remain open to dialogue not only internally, but also among the different communities.

The creation of "threshold spaces" is decisive as places where people can meet and discuss issues in reciprocal involvement. Stavrides, referencing Foucault, speaks

about *eterotopie*: meeting places where “the differences meet” (p.71). These are common spaces that are decisive for the creation of a culture of involvement which is indispensable to reactivate traditional solidarity practices, to give living a humane face, to eliminate city boundaries and to implement forms of struggle for social justice. These communities temporarily use spaces that become common. It is also in this way that they evade the processes of normalisation implemented by the ruling institutions. In the common spaces the communities generate democratic processes of mutual recognition which have positive repercussions on the daily lives of the “peripheral people” economically, socially, ethically and spiritually. According to Rancière (2010), these communities are real political communities implementing democratic decision-making processes that are non-centralised and hierarchical. In many cases, they constitute examples of direct participatory democracy.

In certain cases, these communities acquire the collaboration of architects and urban planners in order to recreate the urban spaces and to give shape to healthy, aesthetically-pleasing, welcoming, functional and safe living able to generate a sense of well-being for those who live there. In some large Latin American cities, we find examples of large-scale peripheral construction projects aimed at grass roots regeneration and emancipation, promoted by the local authorities with involvement and collaboration on the part of the community.

## **Conclusion**

Living, as a condition which specifies man’s “being-in-the-world”, characterises in an existential sense man’s way of being, way of life and behaviour. It becomes a form of degradation not only in relation to income, but also in the absence of and misrecognition of basic liberties, of *capabilities*. The cities of the poor are enclosed within the “barbed wire” boundaries of substantial deprivations of freedom. Sometimes these deprivations are compensated by a form of living that, though poor, does not descend into misery thanks to relationships and bonds of coexistence characterised by mutual aid, solidarity, friendship, a sense of sharing material resources and respect etc., in other words, a whole set of ethical values often absent in opulent societies.

In many cities around the world the mobilisation of communities, interconnected through the sharing of common spaces, constitutes for millions of people very important realities for implementing forms of democratic struggle for the elimination of social injustice, for the effective exercise of human rights, for humane dwelling where aspirations and projects for a good life “with and for others” can be fulfilled.

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