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Is the Right to Mobility a Right to the City? Examining a Well-Accepted Planning Paradigm

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Abstract: In many countries mobility is one of the pillars of public policies for urban development. The "right to mobility" has been assimilated to the very concept of the "right to the city" put forward by Henri Lefebvre a half century ago. However, based on recent surveys, the present paper intends to show that a greater offer of mobility can have the opposite effect of increasing the economic dependence of poor peripheries, thus contributing to the phenomenon of socio-spatial segregation. To show this perverse effect of mobility, we use the results drawn out from case studies located in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In this context, the areas with the greatest mobility offer correspond to those that are now more dependent and emptied of employment and daily urban life. This greater accessibility has the effect of transforming these better served areas into dormitory peripheries. In contrast, other areas, with much less mobility offer, are able to avoid this direct competition with the city center. In conclusion, the paper proposes a necessary revision of the concept of mobility as a foundation for urban development which became even more pressing under the current COVID-19 crisis.

Key words: Metropolitan periphery, social segregation, urban development, urban mobility.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the validity of the relationship that sees the right to mobility as a right to the city. Indeed, one tends to naturalize today the idea that the offer of mobility is an integral element of the quality of urban life. In many countries mobility is one of the pillars of public policies for urban development. The "right to mobility" has been assimilated to the very concept of the "right to the city" put forward by Henri Lefebvre fifty years ago [1]. Based on recent surveys, the present paper intends to show that a greater offer of mobility has the effect of increasing the economic dependence of poor peripheral neighborhoods, thus contributing to the phenomenon of socio-spatial segregation [2]. To show this perverse effect of mobility, we use the results drawn out from case studies located in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This context is relevant to such analysis because it corresponds to a territory characterized by strong social and spatial inequality in which transportation infrastructure has historically been the main driving force of the urbanization process [3]. The Strategic Plan for Integrated Urban Development of the Metropolitan Region of Rio (PDUI), approved in 2018, recommends the creation of new peripheral centralities as a main strategy to fight against this unequal condition and the polarization of the job offer concentrated in the downtown area. To achieve this goal, the plan follows Transit Oriented Development (TOD) principles and focuses on increasing the mobility infrastructure.

However, recent studies show that the peripheries with the greatest mobility offer correspond to those that are now more dependent and emptied of employment and daily urban life, since their residents have a means of transport to move to the pole of better service offer and employment [4]. This greater

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accessibility has the effect of transforming these well-served areas into dormitory peripheries.

In contrast, other areas, with much less mobility offer, are able to avoid this direct competition with the city center attractiveness. A local economy can thus develop, creating less economic dependence and an increased sense of community that, in turn, preserves these less accessible areas from being transformed into a perimeter-dormitory area [5]. In these regions, it is possible to identify a greater local job offer and productive activity (even if it is mainly informal) that not only keeps the resident population in the place, but also provides an effective "right to the city", and not just a "right to mobility" [6].

2. Method, Materials and Context

The present study is based on the analysis of a series of statistical data. Part of the data comes from the last available census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [7], either through direct access to its database, or with the help of studies that used it, as in the case of the study prepared by the Brazilian Support Service for Small Enterprises on urban mobility and the labor market in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro [4].

In addition to these sources, we also used the survey published by the recent Plan for the Metropolitan Region [8]. The discussion presented in this paper is based on the results of a critical analysis conducted by us on the actions defined by the Plan and, specially, the strengthening of peripheral centralities as a way of fighting against the current economic polarization exercised by the metropolis central district. The concept of centrality used by the Plan, however, is based on a direct relationship with the mobility offer and that is precisely what is examined here.

Finally, the discussion presented in this paper is also fueled by some PhD research carried out within the Research Group *Urbanism, Criticism and Architecture* (UrCA) of the Postgraduate Program in Urbanism at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (PROURB-UFRJ). One of them was dedicated to the analysis of economic activities in residential units in dormitory suburbs and their effects on public space [5].

According to the last available census [7], the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro (RMRJ) is characterized by a strong concentration of job offer in the center of the metropolis, generating a situation of extreme socio-spatial inequality within the boundaries of the metropolitan region. Today, almost 75% of formal employment is concentrated in the state capital city of Rio de Janeiro. The second municipality in terms of jobs represents only 5% of the total offer whereas two other relatively populous neighboring municipalities offer less than 3% each to their local inhabitants who are forced to go to the center of the metropolis on a daily basis for their job. About 4 million people move daily to a metropolitan center that concentrates 40% of the city's job offer, that is, about 1/3 of all formal employment of the RMRJ.

These are therefore numbers that portray a situation of extreme concentration and economic polarization exerted by the central core of the metropolis. A situation ends up capturing most of the economic dynamics and investments of the region and subjecting the other municipalities of the RMRJ to a cruel condition of economic dependence in relation to the center of the metropolis. These neighboring municipalities have then been transformed into bedroom communities for a population of lower income, which is precisely more dependent on public transportation to move from home to work.

3. Mobility Offer and Urbanization Process

In the RMRJ, transportation was, historically, the main driver of the urbanization process. Infrastructure is generally used to add value to lands of large rural properties that, becoming more accessible, were parceled and transformed into real-estate developments. The idea of a strictly residential suburb

was born at that moment, for the wealthy classes who wanted to live outside the city to avoid living with the social and environmental problems of the old city core [3]. Then, at first came the tramway lines, with low capacity, and the intention to carry the wealthiest population. Animal traction was initially used to travel short distances and connect the first wealthy suburbs to the center of the city. The electrification of the lines would allow reaching more distant areas and the ocean shores thanks to the opening of tunnels, all made possible by the private initiative that used public transport as an instrument for the valorization of inaccessible rural lands. Once the land was urbanized and the lots were sold, the companies responsible for creating the tram lines gave them to the municipality. With their low capacity and suffering from the growing competition of the private car, these lines became quickly unviable for the public administration to maintain, being then replaced by bus lines, of greater capacity and much lower maintenance costs. Their improved profitability would eventually attract interest from private sector companies that now control all RMRJ bus lines—a highly profitable business with a strong lobbying influence over urban and regional planning decisions.

The bus lines were thus replacing the tram and giving greater capacity of transport and also better penetration in the diffuse fabric of the suburbs.

The urbanized land rapidly spread, with new areas, increasingly distant from the center occupied by a low-income population of workers that could not afford to live in more central locations. The suburb thus gradually became a residential periphery for the lower-income working classes who found there a cheaper housing option [9]. To serve an ever-growing suburban population and give better access to increasingly distant lands, train lines were then created and continuously extended. Brazil's late industrial development, mainly driven by the Second World War, would attract the rural population in search of better living and working conditions. This phenomenon of the rural exodus radically accelerated the process of suburbanization in all major cities of the country, which ended by reversing the proportion between urban and rural population [10, 11].

4. Local Specificities

If this situation is characteristic of many other great metropolises around the world [12, 13], it is worth remembering Rio's historical liabilities related to the existence of the former Federal District that segregated the national capital from its neighboring cities. This administrative division, but also the political and economic centrality associated with the capital city of the country, prevented, for more than two centuries, Rio's metropolitan region to be planned in an integrated way [14].

Another feature that makes the RMRJ a caricature, making it a propitious case to the observation of the questions raised here is the combined presence of the ocean shore and the hilly topography that segregates this shoreline from its hinterland. Just like a walled city that holds its most valued areas close to the oceanfront, in a narrow strip of land, in which the amenities provided by an extraordinary natural landscape of high iconic content abound—a landscape heritage now recognized and protected as the world heritage by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Separated by the monumental topographic barrier that rises along the entire oceanic coast, vast plains have been transformed into bedroom communities for a much lower income population. In this area, the residential neighborhoods coexist with many locally unwanted land uses such as industrial activities linked to the gas-oil sector (Petrobras Brazilian Oil Company refineries) and also freight facilities (Rio's municipal food supply market and the container port).

5. Recent Planning Actions

In order to face the challenges imposed by these specificities, but also to support the transformations

triggered by the agenda of major world events that Rio de Janeiro has welcomed in the last decade, planning actions have been and are being promoted. They contributed to the collection of data and a generated successive document whose purpose was to guide investments in sectors considered strategic among which is urban mobility. At a metropolitan level, we can mention the Metropolitan Region Urban Transportation Master Plan (PDTU-2015) and, more recently, the already mentioned Strategic Plan for Integrated Urban Development (PDUI-2018).

Determined by the sector-specific limitations, the PDTU of 2015 points out the need to develop the capacity of public transportation in order to achieve a better geographical distribution of the lines, with a special emphasis on serving distant peripheries with high rates of population growth. Such demographic rates are then immediately translated in a scenario of increased demand and, consequently, lack of supply. This has been the planning logic driving the projects already implemented which intended to bring the infrastructure to the recently urbanized areas, thus consolidating the process of urban sprawl through the transformation of old rural areas and still preserved natural areas into urban lots. It is, therefore, a perverse logic that ends up encouraging a process of predatory occupation of the territory and a rewarding real estate market mechanism, be it formal or informal. Such processes generate a growing and never satisfactorily served demand of public infrastructure given the ever increasing distances and times of travel between these new places of residence and the main job offer opportunities still polarized, as already said, in the traditional core of the metropolis.

The 2018 PDUI seeks to distinguish itself from this transport sector planning logics in the sense that it pushes forward the idea of a desirable geographical decentralization of the job offer thanks to the strengthening of already existing centers that it strives to identify. The principle is the creation of a network of alternative centralities to the main downtown district of the metropolis as a way to bring the jobs and services offer closer to the dwelling place of the population. The challenge that such an objective imposes is the capacity of such peripheral centers to attract economic activity capable of transforming them into poles of enough relevance at the scale of the metropolis. This strategy is based on the concept of Transit Oriented Development that establishes the principles of land use in the immediate surroundings of transport stations. It thus assumes the largely naturalized premise that associates the offer of jobs and services with the transportation offer. The question that we intend to build here is whether this relationship would not be compromised in contexts marked by a strong valorization and economic polarization of the center of the metropolis combined with a high level of socio-spatial segregation between valued central areas and poor peripheries.

As we have said before, the RMRJ is a case in which these differences between center and periphery are exacerbated by both historical and geographical specificities, thus helping the legibility of the studied phenomena.

In addition to its specificities, the RMRJ shares with many other great metropolises of the so-called Global South, a large array of characteristics that are common to contexts marked by strong inequalities. And it is precisely in these new metropolises, which are affected by rapid population growth, having now their overall development and fragile political stability jeopardized by the current COVID-19 health crisis, that the question of the applicability of planning principles designed for much less unequal urban realities arises.

6. Urban Mobility and Sense of Community

The already mentioned study on urban mobility and job offer in Rio's metropolitan region allows us to question the validity of the logic of associating transport provision, or "right to mobility", with the so-called "right to the city". The study put forward

conclusions that seem to contradict the idea that a greater supply of transportation helps to create better city conditions. In fact, the study shows that the peripheric regions that are best served by transportation means correspond precisely to those where the population works less locally and moves to more central areas with a better level of job offer. This means that the better transport supply has contributed to making these regions even more dependent on the center of the metropolis. This greater accessibility to the main job pole with which it became difficult to compete ended up capturing the vital energy and local labor force attracted by better conditions of employment. The local economic activity of these better-served suburbs has thus been limited to the provision of proximity services and businesses that are characteristic of bedroom communities.

In the less well-served localities, the lower accessibility to the central hub of jobs in the metropolis makes the resident population seek work near their home and even start their own business.

Indeed, in a precedent research, we verified a similar phenomenon. In streets that are less well served by transportation means and, therefore, less accessible and more peripheral to central activities, we could notice the development of commercial and professional activities within structures that were originally designed to be strictly residential [5].

This study also revealed that the creation of these activities has contributed not only to the generation of income for the family that undertakes them, but also to the generation of communal spaces, thus transforming strictly residential streets into more convivial areas among residents with a greater potential for building a local sense of identity and place. One of the most positive consequences of this transformation is the greater feeling of safeness observed in these more active and lively streets when compared to those that remained strictly residential. This is probably a more genuine, meaningful and sustainable way of building up a peripheral centrality and a more effective "right to the city" than the top-down transit-oriented planning strategies that have been considered until now.

7. Conclusions

The discussion developed in this paper allows raising questions about the quality principles of our cities that we usually understand as resulting from a greater supply of centralized infrastructure. The examination of current planning logics alerts us to the perverse side of the relationship between "mobility offer" and "city offer" and urges us to rethink the applicability of imported planning models and standards to socially and economically different urban realities.

However, the arguments put forward here should not be confused with an apology to the misery and precariousness of public services, but as a call for a necessary change of gaze at the urban reality of the Global South developing metropolises. It is therefore a plea for the planners of such metropolises, accustomed to the "rhetoric of lack", to reconsider certain principles which they simply adopt in reference to other realities qualified as more developed but which do not always apply or fit the condition of the cities in which they operate.

The discussion we have brought here is intended not only to alert planners to the applicability of certain principles, but also to remind them of the possibility that lessons from the South may also serve as a reference for the North. One can recognize signs of such learning in a series of recent initiatives that are underway in many European cities. Examples of it include renaturalisation of paved surfaces, more walkable streets devoid of cars, elimination of public lighting so as not to disturb fauna and flora and even the claim of the possibility of living with floods in much more porous cities [15]—a brand new array of contemporary values that resemble in some way some of the current conditions that are qualified as bad and that many cities in the Global South still seek to

overcome.

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