A neo-localism compatible with markets and globalization

A contribution by Robert Spizzichino, INTA member

March 2017

At Habitat III, in Quito and elsewhere, an old debate was brought back to life with force: Mayors and Associations of cities made clear that they can better deal with the global problems than States and supra-national organizations. A similar movement flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century. Several political concepts were debated: "localism", "territorialism", "municipalism". Below is a text by Robert Spizzichino, engineer and urban planner that clarifies certain aspects of the debate. These elements will also appear in a brochure of the AITEC Urbain association "Habitat III and after", as well as in an upcoming issue of the French journal "Urbanisme". They were also discussed during the "Transition Week" held in Grenoble from 8 to 12 March. This debate should be taken further and INTA will contribute to it, with the Act 2 of its Initiative "Cities and territories in transformation", a work ensuing from the publication for the Habitat III Conference (read), as well as from the examples carried out by the Communities of Competences, in particular about the new relationships between urban and rural (read) and the metropolization process (read).

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, thoughts and initiatives have been developed calling for "localism"[1] or "territorialism"[2]. They imply active resistance against globalization, a requirement for a genuine ecological transition and genuine participatory democracy. "Neo-localism" has even been called the "open localism" advocated by authors like Serge Latouche to extend the principles of localism to all society and interpersonal relations. These doctrines have given rise to multiple

---

[1] Localism is a doctrine which consists in privileging what is local but without setting boundaries in order to promote participatory democracy, social cohesion and local economy, thus local employment and the preservation of the environment via a smaller ecological footprint of the transport of people and goods.

[2] The territorialist movement is based on a criticism of a strictly environmental vision of sustainable development. The territorial school emphasizes the need for qualitative local development and has coined the concept of "sustainable local development". The objective is to strike a balance between three objectives: development oriented towards basic needs (which are not reduced to material needs); the political, economic and social autonomy of local communities; and improving the quality of the environment.

experiences such as local currencies, microcredit, AMAPs and local food systems, cities in transition, urban agriculture, cooperative housing, etc.

Held after COP21, Habitat III could have been the occasion of a strong offensive by movements supporting these radical policies in an attempt to respond to the global challenges highlighted by numerous diagnoses. In fact, it did not happen. These "localist" experiences were put out of their political context and referred only as useful markers for a sustainable city, and no more.

On the other hand, an effective "neo-localism" came forward, carried mainly by the major world metropolises. A number of them, at various meetings, underlined the inability of States to solve major problems such as sustainability, social inequalities and poverty, food security, crime and violence, etc. As the world is becoming increasingly urban, and as States are weakened by the public debt, the idea came that it is up to City governments to solve these global problems. In addition, those major global cities, hosting the decision-making centers that make globalization work, claimed that they have a special mission in this domain (currently 12.5% of the world's population lives in one of the 28 mega-cities with more than 10 million inhabitants and this percentage is growing exponentially).

This claim gave way to a vigorous demand for recognition by the United Nations system as a player in its own right, particularly in international conferences; this neo-localism movement explains the setting up of bodies such as the Parliament of Mayors or networks such as the C40; this neo-localism was clearly displayed at the Quito international exhibition where flags of metropolitan cities distinct from those of the States were flown and were the large global cities often held views opposed to their States. It is clear that these pressures will continue. In the networks of cities of all types that flourished in recent times, the weight of the large metropolises remains dominant.

The European research program CITTA (Cities as International and Transnational Actors) highlights the acceleration of these trends where metropolises take an increasing place in the world government, going beyond the borders seen as outdated. Demands for more decentralization and territorial autonomy will increase, especially with the rise of nationalist and populist leaders in many States.

Large cities and urban areas, with certain exceptions, do not have enough authority and the necessary means they need to manage water resources, major port and airport infrastructure, housing finance, higher education, etc. The dichotomy between regions and metropolitan areas that exists in some countries further reduces the room for manoeuvre to access these powers. But there is no doubt that claims to get them will rise.

This neo-localism there is quite compatible with free trade and financial globalization, and several multinationals corporate foundations support major networks of cities where progressist and conservative political representatives coexist around a consensus on the problems to be solved, even if the solutions are not the same.

Two types of "neo-localism" are likely to develop in the years to come: one led by major metropolises and one by cities and territories looking for alternative modes of development that break with neo-liberal globalization. It is interesting to note that some metropolises belong to the two types of networks: for example, Mexico is with "transgressive cities" and with the C40.

It is important to follow closely these various movements and to observe what trends are being set and what alliances are being forged with other organizations such as the economic sector, social movements and universities.

It is probably these alliances, more than the New Urban Agenda, what will shape the urban development of the next decades.