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Rethinking the Smart City

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review by
Saveria O. M. Boulanger

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What is today a Smart City?

When the word appeared at the end of last century as an innovative concept, the world looked at technological innovation inside urban contexts with significant expectations. Innovation was, in fact, seen as the path for the improvement of citizens' life in cities.

Since there and within a time frame of around twenty years, several experiences took place in Europe and in the world seeing a more or less consistent digital implementation or actions around the idea of *smart city*.

Frequently, cities installed sensors, collected data, boosted the implementation of WiFi and broadband: in other world cities promoted digital technologies as enablers of change.

What are the outcomes of these processes today? Is it already possible to draw conclusions and to verify the progress of these experiences?

Eugeny Morozov and Francesca Bria addressed these questions with a highly critical analysis in their recent book *Ripensare la smart city* published in Italy for Codice Edizioni.[1]

The essay is structured in two distinct sections, respectively written by Morozov and Bria following different objectives, although with a single shared thesis: the Smart City, as it is carried out today, is the result of a neoliberal economical society based on a new digital capitalism allowing, i.e. through the privatization of data, the central role of big private technological companies - among all those under the name of GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon). This central role produces a direct dependence of cities in respect with these big companies who, according to the authors, built a monopolistic market meeting several consequences: first of all, the complete unavailability of data, produced and collected inside cities, but not easily accessible from local administrations and, in the authors' thesis perhaps above all, from citizens.[2] Secondly, according to the authors, such a system distorts urban actions impacts analysis, producing on the contrary a race to rankings, which assess administrations performances in respect to services provided. Although a careful assessment of actions' impacts can be in itself an element of interest, today it is carried out by using the enormous amount of data that cities produce but not publicly own. This generate an "economy of results".[3]

Eugeny Morozov's section is, therefore, a lucid and critical analysis of the smart phenomenon. The author, known for his punctual and pungent readings of digital implementation in the contemporary world, retraces some of the most peculiar practices related to the theme, including the birth of the phenomenon, attributed to companies like IBM, who firstly produced and sold new technologies for the city, creating new market strips; the creation of surveillance communities, for which smart technologies have produced new generations of robots; up to the so-called greenfields or "new foundation cities" that, pushing to extreme the author's ideas, seem to almost constitute supermarkets or showcases for the latest generation of products. The advent of companies such as Uber and Airbnb is therefore seen as a foregone conclusion of this process of urban privatization, to which austerity has given additional power. It is clear that, in such an urban reality, the few resources available and the "desire to make things work"[4] facilitated the use of private technological suppliers, as well as the presence of unconventional operators who contributed to increase the impoverishment of urban values towards more gentrified systems.

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1 Francesca Bria, Evgeny Morozov, *Ripensare la smart city* (Turin: Codice Edizioni, 2018). An English text from the same authors was published as Francesca Bria, Evgeny Morozov, *Rethinking the Smart City: Democratizing Urban Technology* (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2018), available at http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/morozovandbria_eng_final55.pdf.

2 Bria, Morozov, *Ripensare la Smart City*, 88-90.

3 Ibid., 34.

4 Ibid., 62.

The second part written by Francesca Bria, currently Commissioner for Digital Technology and Innovation in the city of Barcelona with a background on the Innovation Agency NESTA, deals more closely with the identification of the strategies that the so-called "rebel cities"[5] can adopt to reverse the current trends of privatization. Firstly, it is proposed to implement alternative data management policies, through the creation of public and open source platforms; then to promote a transition towards the management of data as *common goods*, shared by the population and public administrations; to take-back as public all services and infrastructures essential to urban life; the establishment of a "universal basic income aimed at fighting poverty, social exclusion and work automation;"[6] finally the promotion of cooperative organizations with priority over the central state and market solutions.

It is also proposed to proceed with these changes through pilot projects and small-scale experiments with the direct involvement of citizens. In this perspective, the author describes several best practices such as those carried out in Barcelona by the Mayor Ada Colau; the projects on data management in Helsinki and Amsterdam; the Health Knowledge Commons of Great Britain.

Overall, the analysis carried out within this essay is precise and innovative in highlighting the criticalities and contradictions of this approach. Bria and Morozov are in line with other authors who were also critical to Smart City, including Robert Hollands,[7] who showed the vagueness of the concept and its criticalities, in being a variation of the *entrepreneurial city*.

The theoretical and case studies research underlying the book starts, however, from considering the Smart City only in its correlation to digital implementation. The definition of the Smart City, in fact, is:

The word smart refers to any digital technology used in a specific urban context produce new or optimize already existing resources, to modify the user's behaviour or to guarantee other prospective improvements in terms of flexibility, security and sustainability[8].

According to their own statement, it seems that the adjective *smart* is predominant in respect to the noun *city*, even if the combination of the two words holds together an expression that links the city to the promotion of "specific neoliberal interventions" promoting the "superiority of the mer-

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5 Ibid., 85.

6 Ibid., 94.

7 See Robert G. Hollands, "Will the Real Smart City Please Stand Up? Intelligent, Progressive or Entrepreneurial?" *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 12, 3 (2008): 303-320.

8 "La parola smart, o il termine intelligente, si riferisce a ogni tecnologia digitale impiegata in un determinato contesto urbano con l'intento di produrre nuove risorse, di ottimizzare quelle esistenti, di modificare il comportamento dell'utente o di garantire altri miglioramenti prospettici in termini di flessibilità, sicurezza e sostenibilità." Bria, Morozov, *Ripensare la Smart City*, 11, author's translation.

cantilist model over all the others."[9]

This definition, although original and particularly attentive to the sometimes less known dynamics of the contemporary society, seems not to take into account the other possible forms of technology that a city can implement to improve itself or the underlying complexity of urban spaces. Technologies may or may not rely on the digital frame. As an example, technologies related to energy, renewable energy sources, electricity grids, technologies for improving the performance of buildings, etc., can be used to improve the efficiency of the energy system.

Moreover, in order to allow intelligent management, urban complexity can require not only the use of data and their correct management, even if this is an important aspect, but also intelligent governance models that regulate relations between private companies, public administrations, citizens and data by finding the most effective balances and equilibrium.

Finally, the need to make data available to citizens and public administrations requires some considerations toward their different roles: as also mentioned in the essay, data accessibility can encourage the production of new innovative entrepreneurship such as start-ups and university spin-offs and, above all, can make cities more aware of their limitations and priority axes of intervention. The increase of urban knowledge, based on science, can boost the application of place-based strategies which must not be generalized and functional to each place, but specific on the singularities of the different urban contexts.

In conclusion, it is considered that the greatest merit of the essay is to highlight the contradictions of the subject, while proposing practical guidelines for the improvement of urban development, also taking into account the aspects of ethics and protection and proper management of data produced in urban realities, even if the aspect of urban complexity and multi-stakeholders approach seems to be left in the background.

9 Ibid., 12.