

# Localism and the city: the example of "urban villages" \*

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In view of the urban sprawl and liberal anarchy of urban growth – which are the two sides of the same coin, i.e. that of the bulimia of an urban model devouring space— that we face today, the issue is how shall we reconquer a social mode of community organization within the great world cities? That is to say, how shall we create such a city so as to bring about a change of social behaviour and representation, even a "rebirth of places" (Latouche), without falling into the trap of local development which does not escape the imaginary's colonization by "economism"? Furthermore, under which forms of occupation of the urban ground, could we articulate the principle of localism in the city, while taking into account the ideas of re-localization of the economy within the framework of post-development<sup>[1]</sup> and participatory democracy?

In the United States, according to the town planner L. Lyon, many large cities like Seattle (1994) or Phoenix (1979) have adopted a main planning scheme which is based on the concept of "urban village". Today, when the policies of public transport development have become redundant (i.e. the policies which do nothing but pursuing the "elimination of distance" in city that is allowed by car, without questioning the logic of moving residents around, as well as the logic behind it of urban soil occupation)<sup>[2]</sup> the concept of "urban village" opens a vast theoretical and practical area for reconsideration of urban reality in a society of de-growth. The concept of "urban village", which avoids promoting a new "false-good" solution of substituting one polluting means of transport (public transport) for another (private car), could be one of these forms which would serve to re-territorialize a city in its surrounding space and thoroughly reconsider the logic of occupation of soil. In other words, the question is: is there – within the possibilities opened up by the concept of "urban village" – a chance for the re-humanization of city, and the de-functionalisation and re-localization of urban space, so that "the city would not become the expression of the nihilist freedom" of techno-science<sup>[3]</sup>?

## Defining the concept of "urban village"

This concept is derived directly from the concept of district, defined as a geographical unit of city planning. An "urban village" has the size of a district (the aggregate of smaller blocks) and is characterized by a mixture of forms of soil occupation (residential, commercial, public spaces...) which offers a diversity of types of residence as well as a variety of infrastructures and functions, guaranteeing a social mixing and a strong interaction between residents<sup>[4]</sup>. The principle of a mixed occupation of soil permits the inhabitants to have access to a whole range of functions and institutions in a small-scale

perimeter. In detail, the urban village is structured around a "core" which includes the most densely occupied grounds (collective housing, business, offices...) and symbolic buildings for the community (a school, a district house, a town hall annexe, a place of worship...). Around this centre one or two suburbs develop, whose land use (residences, business, services...) becomes less and less intense as one moves away from the "core", so that a transition towards less dense outskirts (greenery, parks, private and public gardens) is ensured. The concept of urban village also implies notions of social construction of the place. In fact, one of the principles of the urban village is to introduce a functional diversity and a mixture of forms of soil occupation allowing socially heterogeneous individuals to live in proximity of their place of work, consumption and leisure. To reduce the movements of the individual outside his district, the "urban village" must therefore "possess" a significant holding capacity.

## **The meaning of the place and the "urban village"**

The supporters of the concept of "urban village, while promoting the reduction of individual travelling within the urban space, "seek also to stimulate an attachment to the place, which seems to be the mirror image of a localism that works for a "rebirth of places" (Latouche), that is to say, for the re-enchantment and the promotion of modes of spatial organization allowing for an intensity of social relations and a re-territorialization of needs. The planning process of urban villages involves, for example, the integration of existing residents' associations of inhabitants in community blocks of flats —something that would reinforce the collective appropriation of a territory and stimulate the development of a social mode of community organization at the district level. The landscape, inclusive of the "urban landscape," is indeed a sign of life, a sign of a certain way of cultivating, feeling and thinking. This conception of "urban village" is thus, in a way, associated with the "re-enchantment of places", which implies a clear distinction between a home and a house.<sup>[5]</sup> As Serge Latouche writes, "the belief that my place of residence is the centre of the world is essential to give a meaning to my daily life<sup>[6]</sup>, because indeed, "decisions are made at the base, in this central place —the most important one— where someone lives" (B. Charbonneau). Within the framework of the "urban village", the objective of this mode of a community-based organization is a relatively intense interaction between inhabitants of an urban village. It is the principle of mixed occupation of the grounds, which permits the reduction of intra-urban travel. Combined with the small size of urban village, this is enhancing the probability of seeing a collective identity develop within the scale of urban village, which would draw its essence from the intense frequentation of the same lived-in space<sup>[7]</sup>. Furthermore, the creation of a meaning of belonging to a place depends not only on the residents' common feelings towards a place, but also on the clear and precise definition of the territory. The cores, as well as the suburbs of urban villages are, therefore clearly delimited symbolically. A sign and a symbol are given back to the urban landscape.

However, the logic of localism, which is the basis of urban village, should not be interpreted as leading to a logic of identity, not even a logic of a community identity. The "urban village" does not preclude the permanent links created by an individual in the course of frequenting groups and spaces other than those of the urban village. This is because the different "urban villages" within the city are linked together with a common transport system. The urban village is not there to develop a sense of community withdrawn into itself, or worse, to establish a hierarchical relationship between the community and the

individual which would subordinate the latter<sup>[8]</sup>; it only serves to avoid the "general dissolution of all 'community assets', which are indispensable to the construction of a really human individual life"<sup>[9]</sup> that is implied by the current policies of urban planning. In other words, the urban village is there to avoid the urban anonymity and the rise of loneliness in our modern cities, to prevent simply, as the socialist Pierre Leroux put it, "the society from turning into dust, as men become disassociated, with no bond linking them together, strangers to one another".<sup>[10]</sup>

## **The urban village, a spatial unit for the re-localization of the economy?**

As Deleuze and Guattari stress, referring to the ancient and medieval cities of Athens, Carthage and Venice, "de-territorialization used to be particularly evident in the tendency of commercial and maritime cities to separate from hinterland, the countryside"<sup>[11]</sup>. On the other hand, today, more than ever before, all our modern cities are based on the principle of "indifference to the hinterland". The city and the State are indeed, according to our authors, similar to "two forms and two speeds of de-territorialization": a city could not exist but in accordance with a system of traffic circulation and circuits, which attracts all kinds of matter (commodities, animals or humans) that are sufficiently de-territorialized so as to enter a flow network, whether it is the system of world cities (Paris, London, Frankfurt, New York, Bombay, Shanghai...) or continental, regional, national, local sub-systems. Each city participates in this global integration that is globalization, i.e. in this vast operation of territorial stratification.

Furthermore, the concept of "urban village" is certainly interesting with regard to the relocation of a city in its environment. Indeed, the success of an urban village depends, above all, on the policy of creating jobs in urban villages. Thus the urban village must unite a very diversified economic activity, so that residents are not obliged to make a distant journey to their place of work or residence. There are financial plans and investment measures to encourage the development of local employment within the urban village; municipal policies, for example, may create several incentives so that the private sector could be induced to play the game. There too, the concept of "urban village", liberated from "local (economic) development" and restructured within the framework of a "production oriented towards the local market and meeting local needs" (Fotopoulos)<sup>[12]</sup>, can offer interesting possibilities for a de-growth society. Following Takis Fotopoulos, the localised geographical unit that he calls the "demos", which, in the final instance is very close to the concept of "urban village", can become "the authentic unit of economic life". The urban village can indeed become this basic unit aiming to develop alimentary self-sufficiency, in the physical sense of "producing what one consumes", by creating "farms in the outskirts and market gardens within the cities"<sup>[13]</sup>.

## **The concept of urban village applied in Seattle<sup>[14]</sup>**

The first application of an urban village policy was done in the town of Phoenix, Arizona (USA) in 1979. Its objective was to fight against the expansion of travelling by car and to give birth to, or cultivate the meaning of place in residents. The city developers had very well understood that beyond the substitution of one means of transport for another, they

had to go to the very essence of the logic of movement of the inhabitants, that is to say, to question the entire logic of occupation of urban grounds.

Since 1994, the American city of Seattle has started, in its turn, a vast city-planning project called "Urban Village Strategy", which sought to establish an urban policy based on a compartmentalization of the municipal fabric. Contrary to urban dogma, which apprehends the urban territory as an entity of continuous space, the municipality decided then to perceive it in the form of a succession of small urban areas. However, this compartmentalization was of course relative, the planning of an urban fabric was to be made in the future by the juxtaposition of a series of urban villages, which are mutually connected through a system of communication networks (roads, underground railway, cycle tracks...) and, indirectly, by multiple residential suburbs still unconcerned with the planning of urban village. The planning of an urban village was made possible thanks to the orientation and the congruent aims of economic, political, cultural and social forces, as well as those of the municipality and the residents. It seems, however, that this effort had been partly only adopted by the municipality, and today, the numerous objectives of "Urban Village Strategy" may appear as failed or unaccomplished.

## **Participatory democracy and urban village: re-localization of politics in the city?**

In what situation is the democratic Idea formed? "The consistency of this Idea has its roots in the spontaneous course of human experience," according to philosopher Michel Henry. This takes initially the form of collective work. When a difficulty emerges in carrying out such a work, those concerned get together and consult each other. Through debate, they reach the decision which seems the best to them. Such a decision, being taken collectively, assumes a kind of legitimacy and, therefore, all will submit to it. It is thus in such a situation, the same author continues, that the democratic Idea is formed, the idea of a community which decides by itself about its organization and its aims. As the democratic Idea is born in the realm of social activity, a decisive split is created: this activity takes a second form: it is no longer social only but political as well <sup>[15]</sup>. Politics is therefore a life of interrelation among the living, and today we must "re-embed" (Polanyi) politics into the social realm. Politics must not be an end in itself; it is a means for the local community to regulate "living together" and to provide for its needs. As Bernard Charbonneau pointed out, the "revolution which will reconcile man with nature and himself is born out of a change of meaning: a change which converted power from an end into a means". <sup>[16]</sup> Takis Fotopoulos thinks in very similar terms, in the end, when he states, "Politics in this sense is not anymore a technique for holding and exercising power but becomes again the self-management of society by its members"<sup>[17]</sup>. It is this conception of politics being "re-embedded" into the social realm, which could permit the development of a participatory democracy<sup>[18]</sup> on the urban local scale of "urban village".

In fact, the localism which is theorized by growth objectors is clearly distinguished from the concept of "local development" as it rather proposes "to re-orientate our life on an autonomous territory, self-managed and re-enchanting" because, as S. Latouche stresses, "it is essential for a life which is too short to be re-territorialized".<sup>[19]</sup> From this re-territorialization of life emerges the re-embedding of Politics into the social realm. Thus, the return to the local necessitates a radical subversion of numerous all-embracing

processes. The return to the local is that of a rapport with interpersonal relations and not with the kind of a-personal relations proposed to us by the "all-encompassing media". The major crisis today in France, a political, economic and social crisis, does have as an imperceptible foundation, the paradigm of the "a-personal national community", of the "disembodiment of living together". Therefore, to think globally and act locally implies a certain well thought transition, which goes from the "all-encompassing Politics" to the "environmental Politics". The concrete local community, which is made of interpersonal relations, literally opposes the abstract national collectivity. The concept of "urban village" could thus be identified with a set of units allowing a re-localization of politics through participatory democracy. This is so, because, as Takis Fotopoulos –an important author who proposes numerous analyses inspired by Polanyi and Castoriades– points out, ecological democracy will be realized at the local level, in "localism". This idea of a local democratic Utopia is also closely akin to the project of the libertarian thinker Murray Bookchin, who is very close to the French situationists<sup>[20]</sup>.

As S. Latouche notes, " localism is presented especially by [Fotopoulos] in its political dimension while being also the solution to economic contradictions"; localism will be the angle of a strategic reintegration of economy within society –a necessary condition for building an autonomous society. And this localism is defined by the establishment of "demoi", the basic social and economic units for the future democratic society, that is to say, small units populated, according to Fotopoulos, by approximately 30, 000 inhabitants, which corresponds to about the population of an "urban village". This figure of 30,000 inhabitants makes it possible, according to the same author, to meet most of essential needs locally. For, contrary to generally accepted ideas, " economic viability is not determined exclusively or even decisively" by size.<sup>[21]</sup> The project of creating urban villages in cities is perfectly consistent with the author's aspiration that " given the huge size of many modern cities, many of them will have to be broken up."<sup>[22]</sup> In other words, it will be necessary to literally "blow up" the urban continuums to allow for an economic and political re-localization.

An inclusive democracy is also assumed to unite the "demoi" together, particularly within cities, in a "confederation of demoi". "The new political organisation could, for instance, take the form of a confederation of autonomous groups (at regional, national, continental and world levels) aiming at the democratic transformation of their respective communities".<sup>[23]</sup> Murray Bookchin shares this point of view by affirming that an "ecological society" must live without a State and, "should consist of a municipality of small municipalities", each one of which would be formed by "a commune of smaller communes". This level of small municipalities, within the cities, could very well be aggregations of urban villages "in perfect harmony with their ecosystem".<sup>[24]</sup>

Today, to act locally constitutes, according to Fotopoulos, a way of solving global impasses: "contesting local elections gives the chance to start changing society from below, which is the only democratic strategy, as against the statist approaches, which aim to change society from above through the conquest of state power, and the 'civil society' approaches, which do not aim to a systemic change at all. It is because the demo is the fundamental social and economic unit of a future democratic society that we have to start from the local level to change society."<sup>[25]</sup> The realisation of the global contradictions, well beyond those acknowledged by the movement of growth objectors, must incite "acting locally" –something which initiates the process of radical change. Therefore, the initiative of the

De-growth Party to put up candidates for elections, though it may seem premature to us today, is perfectly consistent with this project.

In the era of expensive oil, the bulimia of an urban model, which devours space, will inevitably be blamed for the forthcoming world energy crises. The conception of city will sooner or later be remodelled on the new energy deal and the new bioclimatic charts which climate warming will induce. Thus, the concept of "urban village" seems to us as an opening to rethink what could be the city in a society of de-growth. This city, in order to survive the extra costs of transport, will have to be relocated in its surrounding ecosystem with which it will have to recreate a relation of interdependence within the framework of alimentary self-sufficiency. The city, reconceived in terms of an aggregate of interdependent "urban villages", and integrated on a higher scale into an "eco-region", will be thus able to face the new realities of tomorrow's world. The concept of "urban village" seems to us to represent the convergence of the logic of necessity and the logic of ideal for a community development within the framework of alimentary self-sufficiency and participatory democracy; it is also at the heart of future transformations to irreversible "new modes of cities".

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[1] S. Latouche: "The local cannot be seen in its full sense of a true rebirth but within the framework of post-development" and "within the de-growth society construction". The localism of growth objectors also avoids the "glocal", i.e. "the technocratic recovery of the local in globalisation. This strategy is used as an alibi in the pursuit of the desertification of the social fabric and it is not but one adhesive plaster stuck on a gaping wound, in other words, a discourse of illusion and diversion" in *La Décroissance*, n°28, September 7, 2005.

[2] Today, they would like to make us believe that the promotion of public transport and cycling could make it possible to fight against the use of cars. This would be a miracle solution disguised under the garment of environmental protection and the fight against the greenhouse effect. The sirens of all our right-thinking people and elected officials then attack the so-called motorists' "lobby", while seeking to change our travel attitudes through the promotion of public transport. It seems to me that the naivety of these policies of promoting public transport, –a new "false-good solution" of sustainable development– comes initially from an ignorance of the logic of occupation of the grounds induced by the use of car, which sustains and reproduces the logic of travelling. The central question should not therefore be to substitute one means of transport for another, but more fundamentally, to thoroughly reconsider the logic of occupation of urban grounds.

[3] Gilbert Hottois, « Le technocosme urbain. La ville comme thème de la philosophie de la technique » Conférence donnée dans le cadre de la 17<sup>e</sup> Ecole Urbaine de l'ARAU, Bruxelles, mars 1986.

[4] Pickus et Gobler (1988) « Urban village and activity patterns in Phoenix », *Urban Geography*, vol.9, n°1, p.85-97.

[5] Admittedly this is a very Heideggerian conception. To my mind, the debate, on the basis of Heidegger's contribution on habitation, must remain open among growth objectors. For example, so as to engage in this debate, I invite (them) to read on this occasion, the article by Marc Perelman, an author whom we sympathise with for his freedom of thought and his proximity to the situationism in his youth, (see his article "To build, to inhabit, to think" against Heidegger" in the review *Présentaine*, number 16/17 winter 2003-2004, p.161-185). If for my part I have, generally speaking, a tendency to share the analyses of Michel Henry on the philosophy of Heidegger, although the text of Heidegger on habitation can produce reservations, it seems to me an exaggeration to detect systematically behind this text the agrarian preconceptions of Nazi philosophy, as Mr. Perelman does. It is certain that one can extract passages from Heidegger's text, which are particularly preconceived stereotypes on country work, the soil... But the link between these extracts and the deeper meaning of Heidegger's argumentation in this text does not always seem obvious to me. Labelling this text as Nazis is a point of view too categorical to my mind.

[6] See the journal *La Décroissance*, n°28, p.7.

[7] see e.g. on the work of the founder of geography Armand Frémont in *La Région, espace vécu*, P.U.F., 1976.

[8] Essential reading on community is the text by Michel Henry, « Pour une phénoménologie de la communauté » in *Phénoménologie matérielle*, Puf, p.160-179.

[9] Jean-Claude Michéa, *Impasse Adam Smith. De l'impossibilité de dépasser le capitalisme sur sa gauche*, Climats, Sysiphe, p. 103.

[10] Pierre Leroux, « De la philosophie et du christianisme », in *Revue encyclopédique*, August 1832.

- [11] Deleuze et Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie, Mille plateaux*, Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1980, p. 539.
- [12] Takis Fotopoulos, *Vers une démocratie générale*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2002 p.205. (Translator's note: Fotopoulos refers here to the transitional period towards an inclusive democracy)
- [13] Yves Cochet, « Anticiper le choc » in the journal *La Décroissance*, n°30, février 2006, p. 7.
- [14] Gérard Billard, « Un nouvel agencement de l'environnement urbain pour une nouvelle forme d'organisation sociale ? Exemple de Seattle à travers la stratégie des Villages urbains », *Annales de géographie*, n°611, 2000, pages 84-93.
- [15] M. Henry, « Difficile démocratie » dans *Phénoménologie de la vie*, tome III *De l'art et du politique*, Puf, 2004, p.167.
- [16] B. Charbonneau, *Sauver nos régions, Ecologie, régionalisme et sociétés locales*, Sang de la terre, 1991, p.195.
- [17] Fotopoulos, op.cit., p.15. (Translators' note: As the rest of the quote specifies "society" is meant here "in a broad sense that includes the political, as well as the economic and broader social domains".)
- [18] Although Serge Latouche states that he sympathizes with direct democracy and the Castoriadian inspiration of Fotopoulos, all the same he prefers to leave open the question of reforming representative democracy, by introducing "adjustments of representation there, like the right of revocation of elected officials and the recourse to direct participation in certain cases (e.g. participatory budgets of Oporto Alegre) which can constitute satisfactory compromises" Latouche, *Revue of the MAUSS*, n°22, second half of 2003, p.443. I share this point of view.
- [19] Latouche, « Vivre localement » in the journal *La Décroissance*, n°28, p.7.
- [20] Murray Bookchin, *Pour un municipalisme libertaire*, éd. Atelier de création libertaire. See Murray Boockin, *Pour un municipalisme libertaire*, éd Atelier de création libertaire –see «[Libertarian Municipalism: an overview](#)», *Society and Nature* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Issue 1), 1992.
- [21] Fotopoulos, op.cit. p. 215.
- [22] Ibid., p. 215.
- [23] Ibid., p. 243.
- [24] See Murray Boockin, *Pour un municipalisme libertaire*, éd Atelier de création libertaire.
- [25] Ibid., p. 241.