Mediating between Social-Economic Structuring and Urban Formation.
A Discourse Theory of Transformation and Change of the City's Social Realm.

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Introduction

This paper explores the possibility for a theory of social-economic and urban transformation and change to explain how the relation between these dimensions of the social realm works in cities. In other words, how the dynamics of transformation and change in the former enact processes of transformation and change in the latter and vice versa. The focus of this work is the city. As I will explain, some of the most prominent scholars (Saskia Sassen, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey) interpret cities as being shaped by impersonal, hence unquestionable, social-economic forces. In this way, a separation is created between the urban realm and the social-economic sphere. They are treated as abstract dimensions that operate on two different levels (the local and the national-global) and, still, are characterised by a relationship of univocal influence according to which the social-economic determines the urban. Once a relationship of this sort is established, the possibility to theoretically envision, hence practically enact, processes of transformation and change is frozen.

The theoretical model I discuss in these pages is aimed at loosening the rigidities implied by such visions of cities and at envisioning the relation between the urban and the social-economic in more flexible and dynamic terms – the urban and the social economic being distinct but not separate spheres that imply and influence each other. In so doing, the model attempts to unlock the possibility to understand change – whether change is interpreted in terms of the internal transformation of an existing urban, social and economic order (say, capitalism) or in terms of questioning such an order. The hypothesis is that processes of transformation and change are not the outcome of impersonal and anarchic forces, but are based on social agency. This necessitates, I believe, a level of mediation between the social-economic and the urban that I call *discourse as site for social-political action*.

The work articulates in two sections. Section 1 is propaedeutical to the discussion in section 2, which addresses the possibility for a discursive theory of urban and social-economic transformation and change. In the first part I discuss the work of some of the most prominent urban theorists such as Saskia Sassen, David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre. It is argued that these authors rely on a vertical and hierarchical understanding of the relation between the social-economic and the urban that is not adequate to explain change as they expunge social agency from the social process. It is also argued that such an approach has the effect of separating the social-economic and the urban in two different spheres; which become impersonal subjects with intrinsic

characteristics to be objectively observed. Here it lies what I call, drawing on Foucault (1989, 1994), the tension between *subjectivisation* and *de-subjectivisation*.

The tension between *subjectivisation* and *de-subjectivisation* is addressed in terms of *power*. Starting from Michele Foucault's theory of power (1994), urban space, the city and the social realm are regarded as social constructions made of a complex of power relations, orders of truth and systems of knowledge. However, Foucault's transformation of power into a structural order that determines everything that occurs in the social realm, immobilises the social process into an inescapable base-superstructure system, and freezes the possibility for transformation and change. The solution to this is seen in Hannah Arendt's theory of power, politics and democracy. According to Hannah Arendt, power is the precondition for political action, which is the site for the action and interaction of different social subjects.

The second part focuses on the possibility for a discourse theory of urban and social-economic transformation and change. Discourse is interpreted as site for social-political action that articulates the relationship between the urban and the social-economic realm. Discourse is seen, in other words, as the space where different sets of worldviews, ideologies, ideas and belief compete to gain hegemony and be turned into 'real' policies to enact processes of transformation and change of the urban and the social-economic.

The paper concludes that since cities, their urban order and social-economic organisation are social construction, there is always in principle the possibility to enact processes of transformation and change to question the *status quo*. Such possibility relies on the willing of social actors to engage in social-political action.

1. Sassen, Harvey, Lefebvre: the Abstractness of the Social Process and the Absence of Politics

1a. Sassen: the *subjectivisation* of the city and the social process

Saskia Sassen's work on "global cities" questions some of the traditional assumptions about the impact of global financial economy on the social order of such cities. Sassen emphasises the tensions, contradictions and multifaceted nature of the global city's social-economic organisation. The first tension is that between *dispersal* and *concentration*, that is, the geographic dispersal of manufacturing on one side, and the centralisation of the functions of control and management required by the rise of a service-led economy on the other. The second tension is that between major cities and nation states: the growth of the former does not correspond to the growth of the latter and there is often a pronounced gap between leading cities and other prominent cities in the same country. A third tension regards social polarisation: the surge in high-income jobs and urban gentrification are accompanied by the surge in low-income jobs and low income urban areas (2001).

Sassen envisions the production and reproduction of the social and economic order of global cities as a *process* made of different forces operating on different levels. Finance is just one of these forces and comprises of a wide range of jobs – rather than just of highly complex activities (2001: 331). What is more, the changes it determines in terms of economic and social organisation, urban configuration, and relations between the local and the national, are not interpreted as remnants of past eras, but as intrinsic to the development of capitalism itself.

From the epistemological perspective of this paper (a social constructionism according to which the urban, social and economic organisation of cities is a social-discursive construction), the weakness of Sassen's work in terms of its capacity to envision a model of social-economic development to challenge the patterns of global financial capitalism, is the transformation of these various trajectories into impersonal processes that articulate the functioning of what becomes an independent subject itself: the global city. Social agents, the processes of policy and decision-making and the complex of worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests on which such decisions are based are put in the background, or treated as superstructural elements. The tension and the reciprocal implication between the *subjectivisation* (the transformation of the city into a self-sustained entity to be objectively observed) and the *de-subjectivisation* of the city (the fact of being considered apart from human agency and specific systems of truth and knowledge) (Foucault: 1989a, 1989b, 1994) produces, I believe, the effect of making it depend on one single trajectory (financial services) – while reinforcing the dominant representation of financial capitalism as necessary and unquestionable. To put it differently, the lack of a discursive level to articulate the relation between the dynamics of urban formation and the processes of social-economic transformation, and to explain how the worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests of various social actors are turned into 'real' policies; such a neglect of the role of discourse as site for social-political action somehow leads to a cause-effect relationship between the social-economic and the urban realm of cities. A cause-effect approach to the relationships between the dynamics of urban formation and the process of social-economic structuring of cities separates, rather than relating them, and establishes the dependence of the latter on the former. As I explain in the second part of the paper, when it comes to cities it is not possible to establish a clear distinction between 'what is urban' and 'what is social-economic'; as the urban and the social-economic imply each other. Cause-effect analyses, I think, tell only a part of the story; and need to be integrated with a more dynamic approach to take into account the intricacies and complexities of the relationship between the urban and the social-economic.

1b. David Harvey: *subjectivisation* in the dynamics of spatialisation of capital

The same tension between *subjectivisation* and *de-subjectivisation* characterises David Harvey's analysis of capitalism and its dynamics of spatialisation and urbanisation (2006a). Urban space is, according to Harvey, where capital is structured through processes of accumulation and over-accumulation, so that the growth of capital corresponds to its spatial expansion. Economic crises, Harvey explains, happen anytime phases of over-accumulation of capital occur. This can happen either in the form of, say, unemployment, or inflation, or excess of unwanted assets on the stock markets (ibid.). Over-accumulation is also a way for multinational corporations to gain more favourable policies in terms of deregulation and taxation from central governments. In such cases, corporations threaten central governments to relocate pieces of their productive activities in

countries with low regulation and labour costs, so as to engender over accumulation of workforce (unemployment). In general terms, phases of over-accumulation of capital are overcome and dynamics of accumulation recovered by the creation of new investment opportunities, as in the case of urban regeneration processes or war.

According to Harvey, the city is a complex of artefacts, spatial configurations, institutional arrangements, legal forms, political and administrative systems and hierarchies of power, which in a classbound society necessarily acquire a class content. Such class content and the underpinning social relations of power also affect the construction of the inhabitants' conscious; that is, their perception of the urban and the knowledge of what urban means (2001: 350). For "under capitalism, it is the broad range of class practices connected to the circulation of capital, the reproduction of labor power and class relations, and the need to control labor power, that remains hegemonic" (349). Although the emphasis that Harvey puts on social relations of power as providing the urban with meaning opens up the possibility for transformative practices (for the notion of urban can in principle be filled with different meanings as social relations of power change), social relations of power become a structural element of society that reproduces an economic base. This fact raises the following question: if over-determining economic forces and structures of power relations engender urban and spatial configurations with no mediation between the former and the latter, how are processes of transformation and change possible? And how are impersonal economic forces and structures of power relations reflected in urban and spatial configurations?

One of the consequences of interpreting the relations between the social-economic and the urban realm in terms of a base-superstructure dynamic is that such an interpretation actually separates rather than relating them. The absence of any mediation in the relation between the social-economic and the urban does not in fact imply exchange (exchange necessarily requires the existence of a medium) but the passive dependence of the latter on the former. Strictly related to that (as I explained in relation to Sassen's work) is *subjectivisation*: the transformation of the social-economic configurations and the urban organisation of cities into *subjects* that can be *objectively* known. Human agency and politics are themselves reduced to superstructural elements whose only raison d'être is to pave the way to capital's interests. The absence of a level of mediation between the social-economic and the urban which would also acknowledge social actors a certain degree of independence and autonomy, does not only preclude the possibility to understand how transformation and change as contestation of the *status quo* may occur; it also precludes the possibility to explain how the reproduction of impersonal economic structures in the form of equally impersonal urban and spatial configurations works.

1.c Henri Lefebvre: the absence of a medium between social-economic structures and the processes of space production

Henri Lefebvre emphasises the importance of mediation as a way of understating the dynamics of space production and of challenging epistemology's transformation of space into an abstract object. According to Lefebvre, space has since Descartes been reduced to a "mental thing" completely detached from its social nature (1991: 3). Epistemology has enveloped the social into the mental with no mediation between them. Knowledge, he adds, can only "be expected to

reproduce and expound the process of production" (36). It can only work, in other words, *ex post*. Such a view, however, leads to a different kind of abstraction from what Lefebvre sees in epistemology. Discourse, I believe, cannot be limited to the re-production of an existing space. Discursive interaction in the form of communication between different social actors (institutions, associations, political parties, local communities, entrepreneurs, companies, corporations, local and national government, governmental and non governmental agencies, etc.) about the form, functions, uses and ownership of space comes before space is physically constructed. Discourse constitutes the site where different sets of worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests compete to gain social-political consent and hegemony, and then to be turned into real policies and politics of space. It constitutes, to put it simply, the preconditions for space production. To jump from social-economic structures to urban space means to enclose the relationship between them within a base-superstructure dichotomy, where the urban becomes the passive receiver of the social-economic. In a different way from epistemology, Lefebvre expunges mediation from the process of space production. In so doing, he also expunges change (in terms of both the creation of an alternative order and of the internal transformation of an existing system) from the social process. For it is through social-political action (discourse is the site for such an action) that different social, economic, political and cultural agendas become hegemonic.

Lefebvre interprets the process of space production on the basis of the teleological progression from *absolute space* (civic and religious), to *historical space* (the space of accumulation of knowledge, technology, wealth, etc.), to *abstract space*, or the space of capitalism, "founded in the vast network of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices") (p. 53). In accordance with such a Marxist view of the social process, Lefebvre argues that abstract space itself bears the elements to contest and transform it into what he calls *differential* space, that is, a space fostering differences and contrasting the tendency towards homogeneity. However, to establish a cause-effect relationship between the social-economic and the urban is to deny in principle the possibility (that Lefebvre himself sustains) for urban practices to enact change in the social-economic order of cities. We need therefore to think of a level of mediation to articulate in a dynamic and non-hierarchical way the relation between the social-economic and the urban. According to the model I propose in these pages, such a level of mediation (*discourse as site for social-political action*) constitutes the space for self-conscious social agents to act and enact processes of transformation and change.

1c. Foucault: the Disempowerment of Power and the Disappearance of the Subject

The relevance of Foucault's theory of power to this work lies in his focus on the subjectivisation of the object of knowledge. According to Foucault, the object of knowledge does not exist *per se*, but is the product of specific epistemological orders. Such epistemological orders are made of the power relations between institutions, social agents, disciplines, and systems of norms, rules and classification that together form a specific discourse (1989a: 49-52). To turn an object of knowledge into a unitary subject to be 'objectively' observed implies its de-subjectivisation; that is, the idea that it exists apart from the discourse that provides it with meaning. Foucault explains that there is nothing fundamental in society (1994). There is no building or space that is able to engender liberation or oppression by its mere physical, spatial or functional configuration; and the same is true for laws and institutions. In other words, liberty and

oppression are not intrinsic qualities of building, spaces, laws and institutions. They are practices. They only exist as long as they are exercised, and as long as the intentions of architects, planners and lawmakers coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom" (1994: 354-355).

The implication of this for a theory of urban transformation and change is what I call *de-spatialisation*. In the works that have been considered so far (Sassen, Harvey and Lefebvre) space is envisioned as an object to be objectively observed, measured and analysed. Space is, in other words, *subjectivised*, and so are the processes and the dynamics that shape it. An example of this is the notion of global city. The global city has become like a sort of 'metaphysical' entity, which is characterised by specific features (urban-architectural form, spatial order, economic structure and social organisations). It is instead my belief that London and New York, to make an example, are not global cities because they *are* global cities, but because a very specific vision of the city (with the underpinning complex of worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests) has at some point become dominant. What I say is that in order to understand urban space, we need to go beyond the description of its urban-architectural form, spatial order, economic structure and social organisation to the very preconditions for its formation. Such preconditions lie, I believe, in discourse as social-political action; which is where different sets of worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests compete with each other to become hegemonic and be turned into real policies and politics for the city.

Visions of the city certainly imply social relations of power. However, in order to avoid deterministic interpretations of the social order (structures of power relations determining a consequent urban, social and economic development) and theoretically allow transformation and change, power needs to be placed at the level of discourse as site for social-political action and interaction between different social actors.

According to Foucault (1994) power can only be exerted over free subjects, as it implies the right for individuals to accept or contest it. Differently from violence, which is an act of coercion, power entails freedom (1994: 342). While this fact entails a certain degree of unpredictability in the social process, Foucault himself freezes the social process by placing discourse and power relations at a structural level. In this way, dynamics of transformation and change come to depend on structures of power relations, and the social process is immobilised within an inescapable cause-effect dynamic. If everything that occurs in the social realm is the 'product' of systems of power relations, and if the categories framing individuals' thought, the concepts they make use of and the very language they speak pre-exist them, then transformation and change are impossible; for transformation and change imply the existence of free and conscious individuals. In Foucault's theory the subject disappear and power is disempowered.

1.d. Arendt: the Re-empowerment of Power and the Reappearance of the Subject and Politics

The solution to this is Hannah Arendt's notion of power as the realm of politics, hence social-political action. Hannah Arendt questions the idea of the 1960s and 1970s Left that the social world is the product of a rigid base-superstructure relation that can only be broken by means of violence.

Although none of the authors I have mentioned so far refer to or postulate violence as a solution to capitalism's 'social wrongs', the 'for grandedness' of the structure-superstructure relationship that shapes their theoretical models leaves no room for any other solution but subjugation or violence to the 'irresistible' structuring capacity of economic forces.

Power is for Hannah Arendt the power to act. It is only potential and relies upon its actualisation (1998: 201). It therefore implies freedom. Freedom to question the *status quo*, to deny consent to those who are in power, and even to renounce the power to act. Power requires, to put it simply, legitimacy and legitimation. Neither of them are absolute. As consent, legitimacy and legitimation disappear, power in fact vanishes. Violence, on the other hand, is an act of imposition upon others by physical threat and deterrence (beating, killing, war, genocide, etc.). It does not need recognition and consensus and is employed to avoid the unpredictability of politics. Violence can surely destroy power. But a regime based on violence is unstable. As it implies the use of sheer strength, a relationship of violence can be reversed as the strength of those whom exert violence is exceeded by the strength of those on whom violence is exerted (1970: 56). However, Hannah Arendt explains, even a form of domination like slavery cannot be based on mere coercion, as it needs the support of the community of masters to be effective. (50).

Since power needs consent, it implies plurality: the precondition for politics and democracy. Politics is in fact the coming together of different subjects from different perspectives. Without the play of differences between equals, there is no politics, hence no democracy. This does not mean that even a tyrannical regime allows some degree of democracy, but that, as long as human beings with their differences exist, there is always the possibility for transformation and change. Here the relevance of Arendt's theory of power to the issue of social-economic and urban change of cities lies. Once power becomes the realm of social-political action and of its unpredictable outcomes (1998:178), the urban ceases to be a dependent variable of the social-economic, and transformation and change of a dominant order can be both theoretically envisioned and practically achieved. The possibility for man to act, hence to engage in political action, implies in fact that whatever the social-economic structure, the power relations, the spatial order, the system of knowledge and truth, transformations and changes which question and challenge the *status quo* are always possible. From an Arendtian perspective, I therefore conceive of discourse in terms of site for social-political action, which articulates in a dynamic and non-hierarchical way the relationship between the processes of social-economic structuring and of urban formation of cities. Conversely, to interpret the relationship between the social-economic and the urban on the basis of a cause-effect dynamic and to expunge social action from the social process means that: 1) the social order should be accepted as unquestionable and unchangeable; 2) not only critical thinking but also politics is pointless and better be reduced to a matter of bureaucratic organization; 2) violence is the only means to interrupt such an automatic processes (1970: 30).

Throughout this section we discussed how cause-effect analyses of the relationship between dynamics of social-economic structuring and urban formation cannot adequately account for the processes of transformation and change of cities. Such analyses in fact ignore social action and regard the forces that operate in the societal world as impersonal. This fact leads to a separation between the social-economic and the urban and to a sort of dependency of the latter upon the former. Such a deterministic view of the social process freezes the dynamic of transformation and

change; whether change is interpreted in terms of questioning the *status quo* or of the internal mutation of an existing social-economic order (say, capitalism).

One of the possible implications of such a way of looking at cities is of accepting the dominant representation of the forces shaping society as necessary and unquestionable. The risk is to see politics, which is the space for social agents to act, as pointless and to accept its reduction to a matter of bureaucratic management of society. If we are to understand how the relations between the social-economic organisation and the urban order of cities work, we need to conceive of the existence of a level of mediation between them. I call this level *discourse as site for social-political action*. There is, in principle, a very simple reason for this. It is not possible for two or more individuals to establish a relation without them using any sort of written, spoken, visual or audio language. In the public realm language assumes a political character, as it relates to the construction of the *polis*. It becomes *speech* as a form of (social-political) *action*. Secondly, as to maintain the existence of such a level of mediation entails the existence of an element of unpredictability in the construction of consent and hegemony; hence the possibility for transformation and change in the sense of questioning and contesting dominant orders.

2. A Discourse Theory of Urban and Social-Economic Change

As we discussed in the previous section, to ignore the active role that social agents play in the processes of social-economic structuring and urban formation of cities means to envision the relation between them in hierarchical and vertical terms. This fact has important implications. The first of such implications is theoretical. If we accept the idea that impersonal and anarchic forces engender a consequent urban order, there is no possibility to conceive of the possibility for transformation and change: the subject is imprisoned within an inescapable system and is turned into the passive and 'unconscious' receiver of forces that cannot be questioned and contested. I am not just referring to transformation and change in terms of contestation of *status quo*; but also to the internal processes of transformation and change of an existing social, political, economical and cultural order (like for example capitalism). Even in this case it would be hard to understand how an impersonal social-economic structure might itself, without an active human agency, produce a specific urban order. The second implication is practical. The theoretical dismissal of the idea of a free subject entails in fact its dismissal on the level of political practice. In a system where there is no active role for social agents to play, not only critical thinking and politics would become pointless, but democracy itself would well be replaced by bureaucracy. Bureaucracy, for Hannah Arendt, "is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant" (1970: 81).

Therefore, to reflect upon how to conceptualise the processes of social, economic and urban change of cities and which is the role that social agents play is not a mere intellectual exercise, as it answers the need to understand current processes of political disempowerment of citizens and democratic institutions. As I discuss elsewhere in relation to the official discourse of London 2012 Olympics, the dominant representation of global financial capitalism as a necessary and unquestionable force is reflected in both the transformation of East London (site for the Olympic

Park) into an area for tourism, leisure and corporate investments (Desiderio, 2013); and the construction of a legal framework that weakens the mechanisms of democratic control over and participation to the processes of decision-making (Desiderio, 2014).

It is my belief that there is in principle no systemic dominance of the social-economic over the urban, as the social-economic and the urban are not distinct spheres, but together take part in the formation of the wider social realm. The relation between them is therefore no longer envisioned in terms of verticality and hierarchy (a top-down movement from the social-economic to the urban) but in terms of horizontality and reciprocity – as the diagram below shows. Such reciprocity can only be achieved through an intermediate level of discursive interaction to articulate the relationship between the social-economic and the urban. For to think of interaction, that is exchange of information in the social realm, we need to think of the existence of some sort of medium to make such exchange possible.
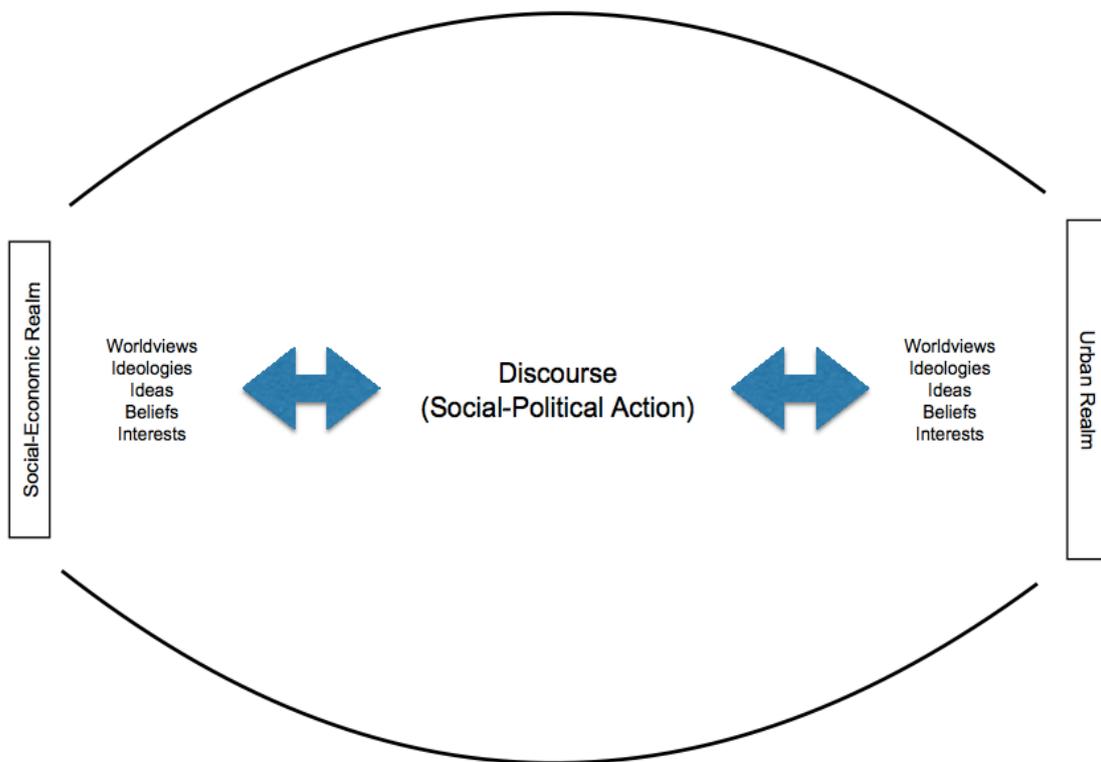
The diagram I showed above is just an approximate visualisation of the functioning of the relations between the social-economic structuring and the urban formation processes of cities; and it could not be otherwise. I am aware of the fact that the social realm is too much a complex matter to be captured in such a way. Any attempt in this direction might result in a too static model to explain the complexities of the social process. However, I think it can be of some use to provide the reader with a model to visualise the kind of interaction between the social-economic and the urban realm that is being discussed in these pages. It is important to bear in mind that the model I am proposing is not a conclusive explanation of the dynamics I am discussing and that it does not have to be read in terms of casual relationships. The relationship between the urban realm, discourse and the social-economic realm is dynamic. The social-economic is reflected in the urban no more than the urban is reflected in the social-economic; while discourse receives information

from the urban and the social-economic and translates them into processes of urban formation and social-economic structuring. However, whether the 'source' of change is the urban or the social-economic, communication between them cannot occur without the intermediate level *discourse as site for social-political action*.

To say that the urban and the social-economic are complementary realms in cities does not mean in any way that they are the same. The social-economic is in the urban but it is not the urban; and the urban is in the social-economic but it is not the social-economic. They both imply each other and equally affect each other, without the one being reduced to or being determined by the other. It would not even be correct to say that they are specular, as reflection still entails immediacy. Nor it would be right to say that they are like two different sides of the same coin, since a co-presence of this kind does not imply any reciprocity and may still entail distinctness. Instead of that, it can be argued that the social-economic and the urban are similar without being the same, and are different without being distinct. They resemble, for example, the human brain. Roughly speaking, this is formed by two hemispheres that are connected by a bundle of neural nerves and are characterised by no form of dominance of the one upon the other. In a similar manner, the social-economic and the urban constitute two different (but not separate) dimensions of the same realm – the city's social reality – that communicate through discourse as site for social-political action.

Another implication of a horizontal vision of the relation between the social-economic and the urban is that it addresses the inadequacy of the traditional distinction base-superstructure to explain the dynamics of social, economic and urban change. Once we accept the idea that the relation between the social-economic and the urban occurs on a horizontal rather than vertical plane, and that the urban implies the social-economic as much as the social-economic implies the urban, the traditional distinction between a structure (the social-economic) determining a superstructure (the urban) loses its explanatory power. Both the social-economic and the urban then become *structuring* elements of the social realm.

The reason why I do not interpret the social-economic in terms of *structure*, but in terms of *structuring*, and I do not refer to the urban in terms of *order*, but of *formation*, relies on the theoretical and analytical shift from *outcomes* to *processes*, from the *what* to the *how*. In other words, on the shift from the description of the city's urban, social and economic order (which entails subjectivisation in terms of the transformation of the city and the social process into impersonal subjects to be objectively observed; and de-subjectivisation in terms of expunging social agency from the social process) to the analysis of the preconditions for the dynamics of urban formation and structuring. Words such as structure and order entail fixity, while structuring and formation imply dynamism.

But then the question: how does discourse as site for social-political action work in articulating the relationship between processes of urban formation and social-economic structuring of cities? In her work on *discursive institutionalism*, Anna Schmidt explains how social agents internalise structuring elements of society and take them for granted, while, at the same time, consciously distancing themselves from them (2008). This dynamic of 'objectivisation' through the conscious elaboration of worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests, constitutes, I believe, the precondition for the processes of transformation and change. Yet, the simple existence of consciously processed values does not itself imply enactment in the form of transformation and

change. Values are not by themselves transformative, as they still pertain to a pre-political phase. Here the relevance of discourse lies. Politics, as Hannah Arendt explains, is where subjects starting from different perspectives come together in the form of speech and action and compete to gain consent and hegemony in the wider social-political realm (1998). But politics is also the realm of power, and power entails both the power to act and the power to not act. It means, to put it differently, freedom to engage in political action but also freedom to renounce it. Therefore, insofar as subjects embrace their power to act and the values they sustain become hegemonic, transformation and change are possible. Conversely, insofar as subjects renounce their power to act, the values they express remain at a pre-political level and no transformation and change are possible.

What this means is that the worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests of specific social agents need to be turned into social-political action for them to affect the social-economic and the urban. Visions of what the city should look like in terms of architectural and urban form, of what activities its economy should be based on, of which social subjects should be included and/or excluded from the processes of decision and policy-making, of what structures of governance should be created to enact such decisions and policies; such visions depend on the worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests of specific social groups. Once this complex of values becomes the content of social-political action (which includes public debate, discussions, newspaper campaigns, public demonstrations, picketing, conferences, the formation of political parties, movements and associations, election campaigns, etc.) and succeed in becoming dominant and hegemonic, they can be turned into real policies that shape the processes of urban formation and social-economic structuring of cities. This is not only true for ideas that contest the *status quo*, but also for the dynamics of internal transformation of an existing system. Any modification of the social-economic and\or the urban always entails dynamic processes of encounter and collision between different interests and agendas; some of which succeed in becoming hegemonic, some of which do not. For this to happen the existence of free social actors and a space for social-political action is required.

Conclusions

Throughout this paper we discussed how traditional cause-effect analyses of the relations between the social-economic *base* and the urban *superstructure* of cities fail in explaining how dynamics of transformation and change in these two realms occur and how the relationship between them works. It is argued that such rigid theoretical models 'paralyse' the social process, with important theoretical to practical consequences.

The dynamics of transformation and change need an intermediate level between the social-economic and the urban to articulate the relation between them. To allow, in other words, the exchange of information between them. Such a level of mediation is called *discourse as site for social-political action.* Whether we think of transformation and change in terms of the internal mutation of an existing system or in terms of contestations of the *status quo*, they are never the outcomes of some sort of impersonal and anarchic forces. Processes of transformation and

change are always articulated through the agency of conscious human subjects, who act out of specific sets of worldviews, ideologies, ideas, beliefs and interests. These are internalised and at the same time consciously produced and reproduced. Dominant social, economic and urban orders can always be questioned by alternative dynamics of social-economic structuring and urban formation. The precondition for alternative action, however, is action itself, that is to say, the will to make use of political power and engage in political action. Since power means not just the liberty to politically act but also the liberty to renounce such liberty, the responsibility of both acting and non-acting rests on nothing else but a free, human-based choice.

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