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THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE CITY
From classical thought to the pandemic

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Abstract

Since the first sociological approach to the city, its ambivalence has been linked to opposing human needs (Simmel, 1903; Elias, 1936, 1989). Park (1915) and Wirth (1938) expanded on the ambivalent features of the city as the coexistence of maximum expression of individual freedom and the pressure of social control. This is the context in which the social figure of the flâneur (Benjamin, 1927-1940) was developed. Modern sociologists contributed to the hypothesis that large cities demonstrate a variety of ambivalent aspects (Goffman, 1971, 1974). At the end of the century, the metropolis became the embodiment of the second modernity (Lofland, 1973; Inglehart, 1977; Lyotard, 1979; Beck, 1986) that the post-modern individual tests out along with the uncertainty of biographical pathways (Bauman, 1999; Touraine, 1990; Tabboni, 2006). The current pandemic, however, marks a new stage in the reflection on the metropolis and on its ambivalence: it reveals new kinds of problematic relationships, evolving into the fear of others, in the absence of a sense of community. In this scenario, a new topic of interest for urban theory becomes evaluating the influence that the pandemic has had on the relational and value aspects that characterize the metropolis, including in terms of health and sustainability (Lenzi, 2021).

Keywords

City; health; sustainability; urban studies; covid-19.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cities have been studied from the 20th century, from a social science perspective as a specific context representing the triumph of modernity (Simmel, 1903); as a social and human environment that, as it progressed, already foreshadowed its decline (Benjamin, 1927-1940); as a habitat representing a specific way of life (Park, 1915; Wirth, 1938); as a space of change and evolution for communities (Gans, 1962; Lewis, 1965), where, nonetheless, innovative cultural forms tended to emerge (Mumford, 1938; Fischer, 1975); and as places where social inequalities emerged (Lefebvre, 1968, 1972, 1974; Castells, 1972, 2004; Harvey, 1973, 1982, 1990, 2012). At the same time, the social sciences have also analyzed codified behavioral rituals in public urban spaces (Goffman, 1963, 1971, 1974; Lofland, 1973; Hannerz, 1980) and the expansion and diversification of the spaces and places that have made up the fleeting, fragmented reality of modern cities (Foucault, 1967; Augé, 1992; Cipollini and Truglia, 2015), picking up on the contemporary manifestation of urban dispersion, coming full circle back to an individualization process that is intrinsic to urbanism itself (Amendola, 1997, 2010; Martinotti, 1993, 1999, 2007; Bauman, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007; Amin and Thrift, 2002).

As the sociologists studied changes in cities alongside urbanists, they repeatedly encountered a considerable ambivalence innate to cities. Since the beginning of the conceptualization of the classical theory, ambivalence in the city has been linked to the coexistence of two opposing human needs (Simmel, 1903): on the one hand, city dwellers were swallowed up by anonymity through their adaptation to civic norms and their internalization as a condition for the very existence of the urban civilization (Elias, 1936, 1989), and on the other, there is the urgent need to affirm one's own unique individuality. The subsequent reflection of Park (1915) and Wirth (1938) expanded on the ambivalent aspects of the city as a context of maximum expression of individual freedom and mobility and, at the same time, as an area in which the utmost social control is exerted. The ambivalence of the city is the theme in which the social figure of the *flâneur* (Benjamin, 1927-1940) also arises, immersing himself in the contradictory atmosphere that defines the different stages of life, revisited over time through an allegorical and poetic perspective. Early modern sociologists share the hypothesis that the big city demonstrates a variety of ambivalent aspects, based on shattering the system of relationships that underline the citizen's attempts at individualization; it is in this dimension that a variety of ambivalent be-

haviors and attitudes come to light (Goffman, 1963, 1971).

At the end of the 20th century, theoretical reflection on the second modernity (Lofland, 1973; Inglehart, 1977; Lyotard, 1979; Beck, 1986) offered a new way of looking at ambivalence in particular in urban areas, becoming a resource that the post-modern individual experimented together with the uncertainty of biographical paths, value references, and the construction of individual identity. The city offers the opportunity to explore endless resources useful in the construction of life paths but, at the same time, it takes individualism to its extreme consequences, which can quickly turn into loneliness. In this way, the city is a place that implicates the disruption of language and its function in shared spaces such as the urban environment (Bauman, 1999, which is sometimes defined as a mirror of subjective individualism (Touraine, 1995), while others perceived it as a relational resource typical of the second modernity (Tabboni, 2006).

2. HUMAN NEEDS IN CONFLICT: THE CLASSICAL THEORY

The changing shape of the city and the impact this had on the system of social relationships – topics already addressed in the early 20th century – are some of the fundamental themes of sociological analysis of the city throughout the entire 20th century, all the way up to the most recent contributions made in the context of the second modernity.

2.1. *The ambivalent tension of cities as per Georg Simmel (1903)*

The wide variety of sociological reflections about life in cities began with the analysis by Georg Simmel in *The Metropolis and the Life of the Spirit* (Simmel, 1903). He explained how cities began to establish themselves as places for a new system made up of precarious, fragmented, and fleeting relationships (Frisby, 1990). As part of this phenomenon, Simmel observed people more oriented toward individualism and heterogeneousness, leading to an intensification of nervous stimulation. Intellectualism, the impersonal nature of social relationships, and keeping emotions and reactions to a minimum are all characteristics that define the blasé attitude, which was a way of life in cities, making for a certain reserve in the way individuals interacted. Discretion and detachment were necessary strategies for maintaining psychological balance in a context of so many encounters and contacts, and were the basis for a new type of system for social relationships. This was influenced by in-

difference, leading to a diminished sense of the possibilities of human relationships and of trust in the potential of the individual. The manifestation of a fragmented system of relationships highlights characteristic, innovative qualities of life in the cities: a tendency for the citizen to become more individualized. In individualizing societies, where there is a complete shift from the "I/We" balance to the "I" identity, as studied by Elias (1987), each individual represents a microcosm focused on building their own life path in isolation, without a network of social support and the sense of comfort that comes from belonging to a group. Individuals are thus entirely responsible for their own success or failure, as was further explained by post-modern sociology (Bauman, 2001). What emerges in this individualizing characteristic of large cities is the great deal of ambivalence made up of opposing forces, with an almost infinite number of nuances. However, there are two areas of that ambivalence that characterize individuals and their relationships in the city setting.

First and foremost, large cities offer individuals seemingly unlimited freedom, which is accompanied by feelings of liberation as well as isolation. City dwellers are free to choose what to focus their attention on, the relationships they find important, to forge their own path when it comes to their professional or social life, or the way they look, but this freedom of choice can translate into solitude.

Furthermore, ambivalence in large cities has to do with these opposing forces of being swallowed up by the anonymity of city life and the absolute need to affirm one's unique individuality: getting lost in a crowd of faceless figures making their way through the social space guarantees discretion and complete freedom, but, at the same time, it undoubtedly levels individual differences, as well as the social, cultural, and human potential of each individual. This puts city dwellers in the position of looking for opportunities and areas where their individuality can stand out from the anonymous backdrop, affirming their unique characteristics. This ambivalent condition leads to Simmel's theory on the struggle of city dwellers who see the large metropolis as an anonymous safe haven, which nonetheless has a levelling effect, but still need to affirm their own individual uniqueness, seeking an identity that is distinctive. Originality and extravagance are used as means to differentiate themselves, drawing the attention of the other inhabitants of the city.

2.2. *Freedom and control: Robert E. Park (1915) and Louis Wirth (1938)*

The large cities that were beginning to form at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century – in Europe as well as in North

America – were constructs unlike anything seen before, full of conflicts and dynamics of marginality that attracted the attention of sociologists working to analyze these new regional hubs and hoping to decipher the dynamics of how they were developing. Those researchers most focused on mapping out the areas of poverty in urban areas – via painstaking reconstruction of blighted areas to obtain an overall picture of the layout of the city (Booth, 1889, 1892-97, 1902-1903) – were also called upon to further study marginality and moral degradation.

The knowledge of the city's sociological layout, as a prerequisite for analyzing the specific characteristics of cities and their organizational structures, first involved sociologists in Victorian London and, a few years later, sociologists from the Department of Sociology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Specifically, in the context of the impetuous development of the large North American cities – melting pots for different ethnicities thanks to massive immigration at the beginning of the 20th century – the Chicago sociologists focused their attention on urban structure, on identifying zones that were heterogeneous and clearly demarcated even within the same neighborhoods. These were centers for specialized activities in an economic, cultural, social, and political sense. This held true for residential areas as well those where prestigious neighborhoods could be found alongside marginalized, blighted ones. This functional differentiation gradually defined the system of social relationships in cities, influenced by the conflicts that characterized them and the social functions and figures involved. In an article by Robert Ezra Park published in 1915, which was later readapted for the publication of *The City* (1925) with another sociologist as co-author, he has already focused on analyzing relationships in cities as part of their function and structure, a necessary context in which they take shape (Park, 1925).

For Park, the shape of the city was the ambivalent product of local and geographical structures, but, most of all, it had to do with the way social groups adapt and aggregate.

The ecological approach describes the city as a living organism that molds itself to the needs and desires of heterogeneous groups of people that tend to create human "habitats" based on their needs and relationships, via dynamics of survival and competition. In an autobiographical note in 1936 in which he reflected on his analysis of cities, Park maintains that this is where he conceived the idea of cities, communities, and local areas as a type of social organism (Park, 1936, 1950).

The increase in opportunities for different individuals, cultures, and lifestyles to come together was, for Park, a way to break up homogeni-

zation, but, at the same time, it led to superficial contacts that were not suited to becoming stable, meaningful relationships. In Park's observation, the ambivalent quality of cities emerges once again; despite being full of resources and opportunities, he said that cities were unsuited to offering stability, to creating well-defined spaces for weaving a strong fabric of contacts and relationships. As a matter of fact, the very nature of the city works against that, making it a dynamic, constantly changing environment.

Park laid the foundation for the theoretical analysis of cities and their network of relationships, tying this to its physical and functional structure as well as the ecological dynamics involved, and offering some categories for analysis, as referenced by L. Wirth in the essay *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (Wirth, 1938). Wirth set forth a variety of characteristics of the lives and network of relationships in cities that expands on the observations of Simmel and Park, developing various points of analysis (Saunders, 1981; Hannerz, 1980).

Wirth's reflections are impacted by the theoretical framework of the Chicago sociologists. He observed that studying urbanism as a way of life can only be carried out from an ecological standpoint, looking to the physical structure of cities subdivided into different areas, the network of relationships established in each area, and the interchanges between them. The peculiar characteristics that influence the social relationships and the image and symbolism of the city could thus be attributed to large population size, population density, and the heterogeneity of the urban population.

For Wirth, as for Simmel and Park, these characteristics were the basis for the ambivalence of city: large cities guaranteed a great deal of freedom of expression and individual mobility, but at the same time, they depersonalized unique individual characteristics, which tended to get lost in the anonymous crowds of the metropolis. City life seemed to be characterized by a sense of tension that was two-fold and conflicting: preserving one's individuality in an environment full of constant sensorial and social stimulation by maintaining discretion and anonymity while, at the same time, trying to assert one's individuality and stand out from the faceless figures hurrying past in the city streets. Thus arises an emphasis on the role of individualism that became, according to Wirth, the most important quality for the city dweller.

For Wirth, this context caused city dwellers to change the ways in which they approached the deciphering of situations and the individuals they encountered. They tended to base their decisions on visual stimuli: the appearance of those they met by chance or in other more structured

situations. This allowed Wirth to lay the theoretical foundation for analyzing urban symbolism, the visual aspects that are such a large part of the stimuli provided by cities, which, in turn, become codes through which one can interpret reality. Wirth thus anticipated a central point of reflection that Goffman and Lofland (1973) would go on to develop in relation to social behaviors in an urban context. Furthermore, he believed that the majority of the most important relationships established by city dwellers in their everyday lives were relations between segmental roles whose function depended on their context, resulting in a variety of fragmentary encounters that do not lead to meaningful relationships. This tendency appeared to result in further ambivalence, made up of freedom of individual choice as well as a process of depersonalization of relationships and isolation, to the point of becoming an anomic condition, much like the social void that Durkheim spoke of when discussing the various forms of social disorganization in industrial societies.

Wirth believed that this multiplicity of contacts and relationships, as part (to a greater or lesser extent) of a wide variety of social, professional, and cultural groups, led to a greater sense of instability and uncertainty. Uncertainty, as the result of these specific connections that never turned into stable relationships, led to a greater sense of insecurity and a sense that everything is fleeting, to the point where it became an emergent social problem in urban areas. In fact, social relationships that are incredibly formalized, with a lack of emotional involvement and a focus more on their utilitarian nature, lead to tension and conflict, as per Wirth's theory. The potential for conflict in the segmental relationships that city dwellers enter into as part of their social dynamic increases forms of social control and regulation, making the city a place where the formal freedom its inhabitants enjoy actually turns into "supervised freedom," with confines clearly defined by laws. This reveals another characteristic of the ambivalence of big cities: while cities can be places of great individual freedom, at the same time, there are many forms of social control, visible or not. Here Wirth foreshadowed – on the heels of Park's reflections (Park, 1925; Park, Burgess and McKenzie, 1925) – the strategic role of means of mass communication, which are able to reach large numbers of widely dispersed individuals who do not interact much, are impressionable and are highly influenced by the information disseminated. Wirth believed these messages to be greatly effective, as they were less tied to reality and more geared toward a fantastical realm of gratification and social desirability.

Wirth identified the role that techniques for manufacturing and implementing social control take on in the urban context as the true driver of change, with cities right at its heart.

2.3. *The dialectics of* flânerie*: Walter Benjamin (1927-1940)*

In the context of the modern city, the figure of the *flâneur* and *flânerie* took on social and literary relevance as a typical form of urban behavior. Benjamin drew on Baudelaire's description of the *flâneur* in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (Baudelaire, 1863) as part of the characterization of the social figure of the dandy.

The *flâneur*'s multitude of traits have been continuously redefined: he has been described as an urban vagabond wandering aimlessly; a voyeur in the crowd who, at the same time, disappears into it; a man who partakes of easy, fleeting pleasures and experiments with new space-time relationships. He fully embodied the individualism created by the new urban reality, a figure straddling two worlds without penetrating – going beyond the old order as the new one was established, with a hint of its decline already on the horizon. The *flâneur* has been described as «a privileged observer of the first rites of mass consumerism celebrated in the Parisian *passages*» (Nuvolati, 2006: 95). Thus, he was like an explorer who followed the rhythm of the times, observing the variety of images offered by the city, picking up on their short-lived nature, and even foreseeing how fleeting they were.

The street and sidewalk were like an urban underbrush holding a multitude of discoveries for the *flâneur,* because he could pick up on details of experiences missed by the crowd as it hurriedly and frenetically went about its business. The *flâneur*, in contrast, was someone who moved at his own pace, without solid commitments or obligations. Benjamin's analysis also referenced the ambivalence of the city as observed previously by Simmel: metropolises, which offer the most in terms of freedom of expression, can quickly transform into lonely places. This form of ambivalence was further analyzed by Benjamin in 1982 using the dialectics of *flânerie:* on one hand, this man felt like he was being observed by everyone and everything, the "perfect suspicious person", but on the other hand, he was elusive and hidden.

The *flâneur* brought full circle that transformation of the urban character that Simmel focused on with the *blasé* figure. While the *blasé* person aimed to control and manage the anxiety brought on by modern life in cities, the *flâneur* immersed himself in all of the various stimuli, interpreting them in aesthetic ways, while also allowing himself to be in-

trigued by their logic.

2.4. *The territories of the self: ambivalence as per Erving Goffman (1971)*

Goffman used the metaphor of society as a theater to represent and deconstruct social interactions (Hannerz, 1980). Social life was seen as a representation that guided social actors as they interacted with others, with a constant attention to impressions at the base of everything.

Goffman used the metaphor of social life as a representation looking back at Park's observations in *Behind our Masks* (*Survey Graphic*, LVI, May 1926: 135-139), republished in *Race and Culture* (1950), which explicitly referred to the metaphor of the individual's life as a representation.

In describing the characteristics of his dramaturgical model, Goffman started from the premise that interaction takes place via the individual contributions of the people involved, who aim to represent themselves based on the expectations of others and the reactions they believe they will elicit.

He began from the idea that when individuals are around others, they have many reasons to want to control the impressions those others glean from the situation. As if in a play, they act a part, with the objective of sharing information, deemed acceptable, that the other person expected to hear. The roles represented are not pre-established but are adapted to the impression each actor wants to communicate, based on the expectations he believes the other person to have (Goffman, 1959).

While Goffman believed the individual was formed via a multitude of interactions, this is particularly true in the urban context, given the wide variety of interactions among strangers that characterize the social and communicative aspects of city life.

In *Relations in Public* (1971), Goffman studied human behavior, interpreting interactions and linking them to the space and meaning that the public realm takes on for the person putting himself in it. Goffman introduced the idea of the "territories of the self", discussing the self in terms of spatial concepts with a wide variety of meanings for the person taking part in the interaction.

The dynamics of interaction analyzed by Goffman in public spaces circled back and expanded on Simmel's analysis of the social context as modernity fully took hold.

Each public behavior was a presentation of self, an element of social identification adapted to the situation, according to Bateson's frame

model. Life was said to be a series of activities with interactions that manifested as microsystems necessary for communication. Some contextual and formal behaviors of convenience served as “safe supplies”, allowing the system of communication to carry on efficiently and facilitating interaction while avoiding embarrassment. Each social exchange could be found within a frame, allowing the social actors to successfully achieve the main goal of the interaction: supplying and receiving information from the other participants in a context that was predictable and decipherable, thus leading to consistent interpretations (Goffman, 1974). Like Simmel, Goffman believed that the individual – in the chaotic jumble of situations and actions found in the city – was crushed under the weight of ambivalent tension, torn by the need to present himself in a certain way based on specific sociocultural spaces and associated norms while still freeing up his own individuality, carving out his own space of truth in the social realm. Goffman's dramaturgical model locks the individual into many roles, with many masks to choose from, which can be added to and perfected, but without which he cannot interact or express himself.

3. A NEW LOOK AT UNCERTAINTY: THE SECOND MODERNITY

At the end of the 20th century, as foreshadowed in Soja's analysis, the metropolis became the central place of expression for the new society rising from the ashes of modern society; or rather, it became the metaphor for post-modern society.

3.1. *Urban implosion/explosion in Henri Lefebvre (1970)* and new urban *sociology*

The acceleration of urban transformation was so important that it could no longer be enclosed in unique and universalist models. The morphology of the city gradually escaped the possibility of representation through models. For many decades, there has been a growing distrust of the possibility of giving account of the great transformation involving the contemporary city and of the social life within it.

With the beginning of the 21st century, the dissolution of the city in the familiar forms was proclaimed, bringing to completion the process of implosion /explosion of urban spaces already anticipated by Lefebvre at the beginning of the 70s of the twentieth century (1970) and materialized by the progressive dilution of the city in territories previously out-

side its symbolic borders. At the beginning of the 1970s, Lefebvre believed that the city was rapidly disappearing and could no longer be restored. In addition, he saw the global dimension of this process, the widespread urbanization that would be the predominant habitat in the future of society (Lefebvre, 1970). Lefebvre had observed, in the possible evolution of the explosion of the city, characters of segregation and cancellation of social life.

The morphology of the post-metropolis was subsequently the focus of a wide-ranging multidisciplinary reflections that described the expansion of large polycentric cities that spread over regional territories now almost totally urbanized (urban regions) (Brenner, 2004, 2014, 2016; Scott, 2008; Burdett and Sudjic, 2011; Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, 2012). At the base of the many urban analyses, in the reflections of Brenner, Schmid and Scott, we have in continuity with the formulation of the concept of urban society of Lefebvre (1970). The city is not only not attributable to a unitary form, but it is no longer recognizable as a spatial form or unitary morphology, but it is possible to observe many transformation processes that crystallize globally at different spatial scales, with wide consequences, often unpredictable, for inherited socio-spatial structures (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 165-166). The result is a new structure of urban life which, since the term global cities and cities-worlds (Friedmann and Wolf, 1982; Castells, 1996; Sassen, 1994; Knox, 1995), arrives at the end of the global city-region. In the most recent urban theory, an orientation to consider the historically established forms of cities, metropolises and post-metropolis, to be dissolved with the emergence of a new spatial urban configuration that invests vast urbanized, interconnected territories, conditioned by economic, financial and communicative flows, which imposes itself with unstoppable force and which is not contractable. It is possible to translate the characteristics of an expansion, which is destined to evolve at an accelerated pace, which can only be described but it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to influence. So, from the input of Lefebvre, who problematize, rejects determinism, then followed Marcuse, Brenner. The new urban sociology that, referring to urban, refers in many different ways to a sort of dissolution of the traditional sense of the city, for something more complex, less linear, more ethereal.

3.2. *Manuel Castells and urban segregation (1972)*

The concept of urban segregation, which had already been mentioned by Lefebvre (1970, 1972), was further explored in *The Urban Question*

(Castells, 1972), referencing the social distance that separated areas due to boundaries that were both real and symbolic. The same stratification of the city was conditioned by belonging to different social classes, which tended to make clear distinctions among areas that were, at least in a spatial sense, close to one another.

The urban structure was, nonetheless, the result of ambivalent and contrasting complex economic and social forces and dynamics. This could be seen in the significant conflict between social classes, in segregated areas, while also leading to an antagonistic yet unifying dynamic in defined areas where the various social classes came together, recreating their own sense of social unity that could potentially lead to historic social conflict and change. In that sense, Castells' thought outlined the ambivalent idea of segregated areas, the result of economic conditioning and relationships between industry and power, but at the same time, there were areas that allowed for relationships and bonds to be further strengthened, reinforcing social identities.

3.3. *A world of strangers: Lyn H. Lofland's take on the city (1973)*

Lyn H. Lofland continued the discussion on cities and city lifestyles in a systematic manner in the 1970s, when the transition to an urban lifestyle as the predominant form in Western society was an irreversible fact. Goffman's analysis was a main part of the theoretical construct of *A World of Strangers. Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (1973), in which Lofland, using an urban anthropology approach, analyzed large cities and their heterogeneous makeup. She saw the metropolis as being made up of a wide variety of places that responded to the needs of all the activities revolving around cities – economic, cultural, public as well as private, all completely heterogeneous, meaning the various spaces were heterogeneous as well. The urban landscape took on a public, depersonalized role and here, individuals made their way socially by trying to carry out complicated mechanisms to decode the places, situations, and people they encountered; individuals played different roles, adapting to each public space without becoming emotionally invested in those relationships – saving that emotional investment for private spaces. A similar ambivalence in terms of space could be found in the many different places where the individual interacted, leading to equally changeable roles, moods, and emotions, creating instability, and a sense of confusion for the individual's personality.

Thus, the big city was like a world of strangers, individuals who were dispersed and detached, most of whom did not know one another

and were merely trying to get their bearings in the urban space. This was in fact the main activity for city dwellers, though it manifested itself in different forms and ways based on the physical structure of the city in the various phases of its evolution.

In the pre-industrial city, in which the urban space was, first and foremost, not specialized and was therefore used for a range of different activities and inhabited by a wide variety of individuals with diverse characteristics, decryption and urban spatial ordering took place mainly through relying on appearance and not via the identification of the urban space, which was occupied by strangers, making it accessible to all.

Thus, spatial ordering became a system of categorizing social groups and classes, whose status could be determined from the various economic, cultural, and residential areas they frequented. As the modern city was fully established in the 20th century and the various manufacturing, institutional, political, administrative, and commercial areas became more distinct, the urban space became further specialized and the various social groups could be distinguished. The overall tendency in terms of spatial organization led to the segregation of activities in specific areas, and this corresponded to the residential segregation of social groups, which at that point, were differentiated not just by class but also by ethnicity.

These localized areas of people grouped by ethnicity therefore seemed to take on an ambivalent quality in line with the ambivalence of the city: the areas in which the various groups of people were excluded and segregated in a conformist society became gathering places based on cultural affinities and ethnicity, enabling the preservation of cultural characteristics despite the processes, some more effective than others, meant to integrate them into the host society (Wirth, 1938).

3.4. *Zygmunt Bauman's urban uncertainty (1990)*

The free-flowing atmosphere that characterized individual and social life in a society of uncertainty permeated the privileged environment that had created it: the city. In theory, this guaranteed the greatest amount of individual freedom of expression, but, at the same time, the individual was subjected to invisible (but no less restrictive) forms of social control. Bauman's analysis, which was very similar to Lofland's reflections on the world of strangers, highlighted the ambivalent nature of the city, which is reflected in the behavior of its inhabitants. This ranged from a sense of threat to curiosity, from detachment to involvement, from anonymity to visibility. In the city dweller's many frag-

mented encounters, he desired discretion and detachment as much as he desired to participate and have a sense of belonging among the throngs of the city. This ambivalence of the individual, at times a *flâneur* seeking out new pleasures, and at other times filled with an overwhelming sense of *horror vacui*, can also be seen in the way he interacted with strangers. The architecture of the city – the way it was developed into areas that were functionally distinct and socially demarcated – allowed city dwellers to plan their own route of navigation, deciding which strangers to interact with along the way. With a clear reference to Wirth's reflections, this condition led the city to being a place in which the isolation that characterized the post-modern individual could quickly turn into solitude: incredible individual freedom and extreme social control coincided.

3.5. *The ambiguity of the post-metropolis in Edward W. Soja (1989, 2000)*

Soja's research on the great urban transformation at the turn of the third millennium (Soja, 1989, 1996, 2000) embodies a strong convergence of perspectives of geographers and urban planners that tends to consider as now complete, and irreversible, the explosion of space already intuited by Lefebvre as a realistic perspective of the development of the contemporary metropolis, an irreversible transition from a recognizable and autonomous urban morphology to a spread of the urban areas in ever larger spaces. From this perspective, the city tends to lose its self-characteristic to yield symbols to rural areas that are now fully functional to the expansion of the urban areas and a constitutive part of the underlying economic logic. The new urban form is also object of Soja's reflection (2000), especially in the context of the fully developed second modernity. At the base of his reflection resurfaces the interdependence between geographic structures and social processes that tend to jointly define the new reality of developing urban landscape in the post-modernity and the change of social relations, in turn partly the product of the new spatial structure. In describing the dispersion of settlements related to the urban reality, the processes of construction of multi-centrality, the urbanization of increasingly large areas, Soja recalls the expression "*ville sauvage*" already used by Castells to define the new urban forms which, starting from the sixties, were consolidating both in the North American and European contexts. According to Soja, the *postmetropolis* represents more than a new, ambiguous urban form. On the one hand, it embodies a gradual transformation that is still incom-

plete, interrupted, which still shows the traces of the modern metropolis. However, at the same time, it represents something different, the product of an era of economic, political, social, cultural reorganization as intense and extensive as it is incisive in its impact on each aspect of individual life.

In the course of his reflection, Soja also uses a new term, *exopolis*, to outline the character, at the same time unprecedented and in constant change, that affects the urban structure and that tends to dissolve the known form of the city systematized by modern urban planning:

> The prefix *ex* (out) is a direct reference to the growth of the *"outer" city* and indicates the growing importance of exogenous forces that reshape the city in the era of globalization. Probably it has never happened before, excluding military invasions, that endogenous development and localized synechism were so intensely influenced by global limits and opportunities. The prefix can also be considered as a reference to an "end of", as in the case of a former city (*ex*), to the ascent of cities without those traditional city spaces that have been defined in the past. All this has resulted in a significantly reorganized urban space, urbanism and *polis/civitas*.
> I also use the term *exopoli* to convey a new critical position – which aims to reunite synthesis and in-depth arguments – on the many conflicting and opposing theses that have characterized the general debate on urban form. The new geography of post-metropolitan urbanism is therefore considered the result of both a decentralization and a re-centralization, a deterritorialization and a re-territorialization, a continuous extension and intensified urban nucleation, an increase in homogeneity and heterogeneity, of socio-spatial integration and disintegration, etc. The compound *exopoli* can be metaphorically defined as "the reversed city", in the urbanization of the suburbs and in the growth of the outskirts of the *outer city*. At the same time it represents a reversed city not only from the inside out, but also from the outside in, a globalization of *inner city* that brings all the peripheries of the world back to their center, taking back what was once considered "beyond" its symbolic zone […]. This simultaneously redefines the suburbs and the city center, making however each term increasingly difficult to describe and define with certainty (Soja, 2000: 290-291).

In a more recent article, *Regional Urbanization and the End of the Metropolis Era* (Soja, 2011), Soja takes up and systematizes a theme already present in *Postmetropolis*, regarding the tendency towards the dissolution of the form of the city in its geographical autonomy and the emergence of a new model of urban development on a regional scale *(multi-scalar regional urbanization)*. This transition is attributable to multiple socio-economic and political factors and, in the first place, to the globalization process that contributes to the affirmation of a new

economy and, with it, new social relations and, secondly, to the effects of the technological revolution that affects the information and communication sector (Ivi: 684). These epochal processes of economic, social, and cultural restructuring are reflected, in Soja's perspective, on four aspects of the geographic layout of the urban realities that recall, in the conceptual contents, premonitory aspects of urban change already present in Lefebvre's work.

4. URBAN DIFFUSION AND NEW FORMS OF URBANISM

The big city described by Lofland and Bauman was gradually established via constant changes to its shape, influenced by globalization processes (Sassen, 1994; Borja and Castells, 1997). The transformation of the modern city had an impact on the system of relationships and social figures following the explanation of the characteristics identified by sociologists in the 20th century as being those of modernity: fewer opportunities for contact and profound interpersonal relationships, individualism as a structural condition of daily actions, an increase in the complexity of relationship networks, and an increase in individual mobility.

Thus, the system of relationships and the social figures that could be found in the so-called dispersed city diversified and took on aspects similar to those of compact cities, influenced by the structure of the local area: inhabitants, commuters, city users, and metropolitan businessmen (Martinotti, 1993) at this point made up a diversified crowd in terms of how they used the city, their social relationships, the paths they took, and the objectives they pursued. This heterogeneousness, which was still linked to the compact city, expanded to include new social figures. The motivations behind the establishment of dispersed cities reflected the variety of types of settlements that characterized the local area: an overlapping of differentiated residential areas that were not integrated and perhaps did not even aspire to create a system of cohesive relationships (Castells, 1996). These included young people and families looking for affordable housing to meet their families' needs or for a less stressful environment offering contact with nature; immigrants trying to integrate who find affordable housing on the outskirts of the city; people greatly in need of geographic mobility; and those living in preexisting semi-urban and semi-rural areas unable to move (Mela, 2009: 40-42). The more a city was lacking in opportunities for relationships, and the more people felt isolated and lonely, the more the social networks and the Internet took on a strategic role in terms of communications and

social relationships, now completely detached from the reality of the meeting place. With the population scattered over wider spaces, a decrease in density, and residents in newly settled areas, there was constant mobility and this all changed the social and relationship structure, and with this, the different networks of communication and exchange. This order was all part of what could be defined as a network society (Castells, 1996), focused on the overlap, without any particular composition, of physical spaces and communication flows, separate from where they took place and leading to a variety of spaces where social and economic life could be carried out.

For Castells, this is where a profound, schizophrenic structural ambivalence could be found between two spatial logics that threatened to disrupt the channels of communication in society. The overriding tendency was toward a horizon of networked, ahistorical space of flows, with the aim of imposing its logic over spaces that are segmented, dispersed and ever more scattered, ever less capable of sharing cultural codes.

4.1. *The pandemic and the new frontiers of the cities*

The current pandemic marks a new phase in the reflection on the metropolis, which is shrouded in an ambivalence that takes new forms: it unfolds in relationships, in the fear of others, in the absence – or rather, destruction and recreation – of the sense of community, this time virtual and at a distance, as in the relationship with structures (institutions, expert systems, power centers) already investigated by Merton (1968), and in a fluctuation of the sense of belonging and mutual trust (Lenzi, 2021).

All this provides a measure of the volatility of the urban context: while in the second modernity this was associated with a scenario of maximum development – despite its inherent ambivalence and complexity – the pandemic has transformed it into a hostile context, provoking a sense of unease and a desire to escape, while the image of the city as a progressive context open to unlimited development is now under threat.

The cities, especially in terms of health, embody an ambivalence of ancient, almost structural, origins: inequalities in terms of access to healthcare, proximity to medicines between the center and the periphery, even prior to these, the discrepancy of a culture of health and prevention based on the areas of residence and the socio-economic level, are characteristics rooted in human agglomerations, even before the urban ones. The industrial revolution and the acceleration of work and

human circulation, the consequent urbanization and migration from rural to urban areas, the spread of urban centers, and the rapid, almost never pre-emptive and adequate, health planning in those centers, has made obvious, dramatic and chronic these differences, regardless of the nature of the healthcare system of one country or another. The metropolis embodies, by its very nature, such a historical ambivalence, so to speak, original, to headquarters that welcome the maximum progress and, at the same time, the maximum visibility of these inequalities in the field of health (Lawrence, 2002; Navarro *et al.*, 2019). The metropolis tends to acquire a new ambivalent image in which the residual hope of unlimited development and the perception of uncertainty, which is its cornerstone, coexist. This perspective introduces a new point of interest for urban theory: the evaluation of the potential impact of the pandemic on the relational and value aspects that characterize the metropolis, which manifests in a sense of uncertainty. Furthermore, a new question arises in terms of health and sustainability: the metropolis has transformed from a place of individual and social health and safety to the breeding ground for "enemies" that spread quickly, threatening our health and social well-being.

New forms of ambivalence tied to the relationship between the city and nature require a new and even more complex theoretical analysis in terms of the social dimension of the city (Esposito, 1998). An example of that ambivalence arises from the nature of the virus itself.

Undoubtedly, the social, economic, and health-related effects of the pandemic impact the various social classes differently, increasing inequality (Lelo, Monni and Tomassi., 2019) and resulting in a loss of confidence in institutions. Nonetheless, while it is true that the virus increases social inequality (access to health care, social safety net in times of economic crisis), it is also true that the virus is "democratic" in how it transmits. All of those involved in any aspect – medical, psychological, economic, political, or social – of fighting and treating it are potential victims or even innocent accomplices (Lenzi, 2021). The interruption of direct social relations in favor of drastic isolation, imposed indiscriminately on each and every one of us, leads to the extreme situation of people falling ill and dying in solitude, and, more generally, to the forced sacrifice of the gratifying, normalizing, and reassuring aspects of everyday life. This involves much more than just the tragic counting of deaths, or the poverty caused by the economic and manufacturing slowdown: the role of individuals is also called into question, in their capacity as social actors belonging to a world forced to undergo both qualitative and quantitative changes, in their own ways of acting and thinking.

Covid-19 has triggered the mobilization of communities united by a common cause (Lenzi, 2021), but, on the other side, the long-lasting effect of the restrictions, together with the health and economic uncertainty, eroded the hope and solidarity. In Italy, according to the 2020 Report of Censis (*Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali*), the contagion of fear has turned into anger. From the songs from the balconies of the first lockdown, today only a sense of loneliness and widespread precariousness remains: the epidemic has torn the veil and revealed our structural vulnerabilities, reducing the sovereignty of the lives of citizens who today have fewer children, are no longer willing to start a business (only 13% are ready to risk starting a business), and 44% say that they are in favor of the death penalty, a figure which echoes Norbert Elias civilization process (1939). Echoes of hope, however, embodied in the dislocation of services and points of reference, information, and support structures throughout the territory. The civil society intervened, especially during the first lockdown, but not only, to fill the structural failures of the institutions in charge. The presence and proximity are not only an effective way of information, but they also help alleviate the sense of distrust of the citizens towards the systems of reference and produce a sense of community, an indispensable prerequisite for good practices of behavior in accordance with the norms of civil action. As stated elsewhere, regarding the "The ambivalent response to the pandemic: conflict versus solidarity" (Lenzi, 2021: 113), this unprecedented situation could comprise a challenge: a valuable moment that should not be overlooked, but embraced, in which to reflect on how to save ourselves from the world's drift. One of the challenges that more than ever involved the metropolis, concern the effect of this virus on trust: both between individuals (Goffman, 1959), and towards symbolic systems of reference, institutions (Giddens, 1990) that have in the metropolis the embodiment of the investment of their own image, their responsibility and the expectations of members, citizens, voters. The role played by social stratification should not be overlooked when assessing the impact of Covid-19 on the levels of institutional and personal trust, so cities are directly involved, as symbolic representatives, in this responsibility. The urbanized world includes capitalism as a productive system, in which animals are driven from their habitat into new urban environments, where they may come into contact with new disease strains and become new sources of trade, often in uncontrolled agricultural markets. These contexts often coincide with the so-called "slums of the world", the outskirts of cities, where humans and wild animals often coexist. Finally, the increased urban density enables any disease to spread quickly, while the migration of

workers and global trade routes act as vectors carrying them far from their point of origin. All of this increases the risk of interspecies transmission (zoonosis), the origin of the current epidemic (Wallace, 2016 in Matthewman and Huppatz, 2020).

The pandemic is a violent reminder of what has happened since time immemorial in the interaction between humans and nature: where humans leave space, nature reappropriates it, taking over from the discordant human intrusion and restoring the natural course of the newly available area. This discordant intrusion in the ecosystem has now revealed yet another weakness, as it enabled the virus, of animal origin, to circulate and spread in humans, without any disposable remedy. This situation and its consequences oblige us to meet a challenge we can no longer put off: to rethink and harmonize our social behavior in relation to nature.

In essence, the uncertainties of the second modernity are replaced, in the pandemic era, with a new uncertainty about the second modernity. This insecurity seems to be due to the fact that nature itself has broken through the second modernity, revealing its fragility and defenselessness. The speed with which the virus spread coincided with an equally sudden dismantling of our social lives in order to slow infection rates, bringing up ambivalent feelings of distrust of others and solitude alongside the need for community, of a dismantling of the social fabric and its recreation in other forms. In response to the risks associated with Covid-19, some short- and long-term strategies have been put in place to prepare social as well as societal recovery through an inclusive approach in an all-comprehensive and resilient territorial community (Copplet, Batt, Rossinot and Danan, 2021).

Therefore, the pandemic has forced us into a profound and critical reflection on the importance of a sense of community and the ability of society to come up with a model of equitable and sustainable development – fundamental to forming and sharing a philosophy that supports widespread political activation, by spreading its values and inspiring social relations (Vitale, 2020). What has been impacted is not so much the model of progress, which until recently was considered the only possible path – (albeit a topic of widespread critical reflection) but the trust in those who set that model into motion, who live it, and who have the responsibility to readapt it. Trust in the system of values that guides the choices and rules of that model, that give a sense to it, and that give shape to the community of individuals, within which they can reinvent themselves and grow.

In fact, although the spread of the virus was facilitated by lifestyles

and relationships typical of urban realities – starting from zoogenesis up to the speed of contagion – it is precisely in the cities that the demand for changes in behavior for a restoration of the health order was possible by leveraging on the resources of civic belonging, solidarity in favor of a shared value, that of social life in common spaces. Once again, today more than ever, the city proves to be not only the theater of its time, a vehicle of priceless resources, imbued with progress and a positive sense of identification, but also a stage for identifying citizens in the place they live (Norberg-Schutz, 1984; Neutra, 1954), where the complex link between the context, the territory and its morphology is revealed and the cognitive and emotional well-being of the inhabitants who are immersed in it, who react to the surrounding ecology and, together, contribute to its definition. This relationship can form the basis for a regeneration of the urban space, for too long time developed in an anti-ecological sense, according to a logic adhering to the so-called Euclidean zoning (Jacobs, 1961), for the creation of new spaces designed in function of well-being and better quality of life for its inhabitants (Saragosa, 2011).

The measures enacted to combat the effects of the epidemic have canceled out social relationships and radically changed our daily habits. The speed and duration of this change showed just how fragile the mechanisms of living together are, and given how the pandemic evolved, the irreversible nature of their mutation.

The new frontier of urban social theory must study the nature of the city and the ways and opportunities for maintaining social order in light of these latest events: like after a very high fever, the social "body" is weak, confused, but is also more mindful and reborn.

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