

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

Miriam Tedeschi

IUAV University, Italy

This article explores an ethical approach to urban planning, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of becoming. A central argument in this study is that the reality policymakers face when deciding how to pursue good (in the moral sense) actions or how to eschew bad ones is ontologically unpredictable and unstable. Unpredictability and instability are characteristics of urban assemblages, which compose and decompose affecting each other in a positive or negative way. Following Deleuze and Spinoza, this paper claims that urban composition and decomposition are good (empowering) and bad (harming), respectively, in an ethical and amoral sense. However, moral and fixed values, often left unchallenged in urban planning and policymaking, fail to describe these ethical transitions among assemblages: in fact, urban planning and policies' unavoidable *conatus*, namely their survival as rational system, is to avoid direct confrontation with ethical and dangerous happenings and, instead, increase their power of acting so as to make urban bodies docile, controlled and normalised through standardised moral categories and classifications. These categories are but ethically generated information shorn of their situated and eventful role, acquiring the shape of data and transformed into fixed layers of apparently stable and predictable reality.

Keywords: Morality, Affect, Assemblage, Ethics, Power, Information

Please cite this article as: Tedeschi, M., Towards an Ethical Turn in Urban Studies: On the Role of Information and Power in Contemporary Cities *plaNext* (2016), <http://dx.medra.org/10.17418/planext.2016.2vol.02>

Tedeschi, M.

Introduction

‘The cosmos requires neither eyes to extend its vision to what is external to it, nor ears to take in anything from the outside. Instead it is both eye and the thing seen, ear and the thing heard, and the single sense in it knows all the sensible objects’ (Proclus et al., 2007, 85.15)

Over the last few years, scholars from planning, urban studies, geography and sociology have attempted to overcome planners’ and urban policymakers’ obsession for excessive rationality and for dichotomous descriptions of reality. Several have directly challenged the rigid, categorical, dual approach (subject / object, good / bad, private / public, inclusion / exclusion, formal / informal), while promoting a more flexible definition of the urban realm. In planning theory, Gunder and Hillier (2009, p. 23) suggest that ‘one of planning’s fundamental purposes and key justifications is to produce an illusion of certainty in order to provide a sense of ontological security in an unpredictable world’. In other words, planning practice provides an appearance of order in a reality that, far from being rigidly categorical, is in fact uncontrollable and profoundly unstable.

In geography, several scholars have also called for the need to overcome linear causality and the illusion of predictable connections. In this context, assemblage thinking has begun to spread insofar as ‘there is always an uncertainty to the agency of assemblages, a potential for relations to be otherwise. This is a conception of causality that seeks to depart from linearity and to make room for novelty and randomness in emergence’ (Anderson *et al.*, 2012, p. 182). In the same line of thought, Amin and Thrift (2002, p. 4) ‘understand the trajectory of cities not as being instantiated through replications of the present, but as a set of potentials which contain unpredictable elements as a result of the co-evolution of problems and solutions’, thus stressing the becoming of the real more than its stratification into fixed determinations.

In sociology, Latour (2005) has revolutionised the rigid subject/object approach. In fact, drawing on Gabriel Tarde (2000 [1898]), Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) does not make distinctions between human and non-human entities. Instead, it dwells on temporary relations among elements, of whatever sort, to dynamically determine what is called *the social*. Other parallel approaches to the urban realm are developed in, among others, De Landa (2013), Fariás (2009), Graham and Marvin (2001).

Following these discussions, this paper aims to explore an ethical approach to urban planning, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of becoming. This approach sees cities as always in becoming, human and non-human bodies relentlessly interacting in search of better combinations. These combinations form temporary aggregations that

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

are then dismantled, while new ones are established, in a continuous back-and-forth movement that both urban planning and policymaking tend to anchor through categories, definitions, and moral statements (Ansaloni & Tedeschi, 2015). However, these categories, while certainly helping to promptly deal with situations at hand, ultimately lack reality: they stratify a city that is already something else, something more than fixed terms can describe. To wit, they lack the eventfulness of the city, where a situated and amoral ethics takes place every time bodies compose and decompose by affecting each other. Indeed, according to Deleuze (1988) and Spinoza (2009 [1677]), (urban) compositions and decompositions are respectively good and bad in an amoral sense: in the former case, the assemblages' power (or capacity) to act or to be acted upon increases; in the latter, it decreases, leading the assemblages' components to seek new, positive aggregations.

During these encounters, bodies exchange information (Simondon, 2007) that is ontologically and spatially situated and eventually determines the result of bodies assembling. If information is despatialised – i.e. taken out of context and fixed somewhere else, transformed into *data* (Iliadis, 2013) – it becomes part of the moral categorisation and stigmatising statements that contemporary cities have been suffering from.

In this sense, a thorough analysis of the role of information is becoming more and more ethically relevant in the actual political regimes Deleuze (1995) has defined as control societies, whose urban planning is an actual part. In fact, these regimes, based on a teleological and human-centred morality, keep channelling the flows of affects, desires, and power by fixing them on moral and pre-categorised (informational) layers.

This moral operation is the regimes' *good*, their unavoidable *conatus* (Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 2009 [1677]), namely, their sole mean of survival as rational, moral, fully-working systems. This *conatus* recursively reproduces itself as the only effective way to overcome the otherwise unjust and unpredictable urban realm and to give the illusion of security and control (Gunder & Hillier, 2009). However, while urban planning strives to achieve the latter, it often ends up being overcome by unexpected results and occurrences.

After the introduction, the following sections of this article re-conceptualise the city as an ontologically rhizomatic and unpredictable reality, apply an ethical and amoral approach to the city, explain the role of information in contemporary cities, and provide examples that help clarify the previous concepts.

Tedeschi, M.

The city as rhizomatic reality

‘The town [...] represents a threshold of deterritorialization, because whatever the material involved, it must be deterritorialized enough to enter the network, to submit to the polarization, to follow the circuit of urban and road recoding’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 432)

Digital vs. real, inclusion vs. exclusion, good vs. bad, public vs. private, innovative vs. old, secure vs. insecure, integrated vs. marginal, formal vs. informal, rich vs. poor: these are just a few examples of the dichotomous and rational categories that urban policies and planning system automatically adopt when readying initiatives, carrying out projects, evaluating specific actions, and even reporting results to the public.

The risks and limits of the rational approach, based upon these rigid classifications and taxonomies, have already been emphasized in the literature. For instance, Gunder and Hillier (2009) state that: ‘planning’s deployment of economic or communicative rational arguments and their resulting tools and processes are based on a presumed rationality of the actors involved, when in reality participants in the market, or in a polity engaged in a collaborative participation, are human actors actually driven by irrational *jouissance*’ (p. 184). If the basis of planning discourses is not *rational*, how can decisions be made?¹ Or how can urban development projects be carried out? In this paper, planning narratives are considered as the result of composing assemblages, whose *conatus* is ultimately to carry out fixed stratifications, which aim to give an illusion of stability and security (Gunder & Hillier, 2009) through specific interventions in urban built environment. These interventions are actually being applied to a spatial reality that, in the meantime, has already become something else.

To respond to these questions, it is important to engage with the aforementioned binary logic and, following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), examine whether (and how) binary logic can be successfully applied to reality – a city, for instance. Deleuze and Guattari see *reality* as complex, connected and disconnected, heterogeneous and multiple compositions of human and non-human entities, such as things, acts, thoughts, people, documents, buildings, that are incessantly transforming and affecting one another. In their terms, it is a *rhizome*, a network of bodies that relentlessly either compose into assemblages or decompose to form new, better aggregations. The term *assemblage* is central, here, because it allows for a better understanding of how bodies interact with each other in a

¹ ‘We are [...] unwilling to concede – in fact we find it intolerable to imagine – that our more lofty achievements, such as economic, social or political progress, could have come about by stumbling rather than through careful planning, rational behaviour, and the successful response to a clearly perceived challenge’ (Hirshman, 1967, p. 13).

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

given reality, such as a city. Several scholars from, among others, urban studies, planning, geography, sociology and philosophy have used the concept of assemblage to re-theorise the urban realm beyond any rigid classification of reality. Following Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage is conceived in this study as an irreducible multiplicity, lying between two layers. 'One side of a machinic assemblage faces the strata, which doubtless make it a kind of organism, or signifying totality, or determination attributable to a subject; it also has a side facing a body without organs, which is continually dismantling the organism, causing [...] pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 4). In other words, every assemblage faces the so-called *strata* – a body temporarily fixed in discernible form – and the *body without organs* – the virtual, yet real, possibility for the body to overcome fixed form, to enter a new composition or to evolve into something else. This second facet is especially significant because, in every composition, there is always a concrete possibility of discarding the given order, of becoming something else, of being transformed into a completely different reality. This was emphasized by De Landa (2013, p. 12), in attempting to explain the two faces: 'one and the same assemblage can have components working to stabilize its identity as well as components forcing it to change or even transforming it into a different assemblage'. Latour's ANT partially overlooks this double side. However, he emphasises the relational aspect of the assemblage, as well as the fact that connections do not take into consideration whether they involve human or non-human bodies. Hence, the aim of ANT is to make 'the social world as flat as possible in order to ensure that the establishment of any new link is clearly visible' (Latour, 2005, p. 16).

Although the relational aspect of the assemblage is certainly important, this paper places much greater significance on every aggregation's capacity for disruption, since 'entities are never fully actualized within any of the relations that constitute an assemblage' (Anderson *et al.*, 2012, p. 179). This disruption, or always actual possibility of changing the given order, is what urban planning and policymaking often seek to control. Their attempts of achieving a morally *good* order constitute their own *conatus*, or reason of existence.

Deleuze and Guattari's description of the rhizome, as being composed of an infinite number of assembling (and decomposing) entities, explores its capacity for disruption while unfolding its principal characteristics:

- *connection*: 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). A rhizome might connect whatever (human and non-human) entities, be they organizations of power or social struggles, in addition to agglomerating different acts, such as the perceptive, mimetic, gestural, etc.
- *heterogeneity*: in a rhizome we find only absolute and irreducible diversity. By way of example, what might a temporary assemblage formed by a wasp and an orchid (Deleuze

Tedeschi, M.

& Guattari, 1987) resemble on closer inspection? Despite being completely different, the two bodies (the insect and the flower) successfully create a map of reciprocal and relentless territorialised / deterritorialised (namely, temporary stabilised / destabilised) relationships.

- *multiplicity*: multiplicities are rhizomatic and, as such, have neither subject nor object, but only intensities, 'determinations, magnitudes and dimensions' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8).
- *asignifying rupture*: 'a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Take, for example, ants: although their procession may be stopped, this makes no difference. Rather, the line of ants persists, going on to reform a line, again and again. Explicitly, cities are systems that, despite what might befall them, have great resilience, i.e. the capacity to absorb the damage, heal, and carry on.
- *cartography and decalcomania*: looking back to the wasp / orchid example: what the two bodies form is literally a map, not a trace. However, the tracing operation is needed in order to fix the map into an image (the above-mentioned assemblage's *strata*, a body temporarily fixed into a discernible form) and allow us to subsequently navigate (and give signification to) its structure.

To sum up, if we consider the city our sample reality, it might then be described as the occurrence of relentless assemblages or dismantlements of connected, heterogeneous, multiple, ruptured, mapped / traced elements, always able to actualise their concrete capacity of becoming something else. In fact, the city originates from myriad assembling bodies, where assemblage results from processes of either composition or separation of individuals: 'the ontological status of assemblages, large or small, is always that of unique, singular individuals' (or *hacceities*, using a Deleuzian expression). These *hacceities* might be human beings, objects or even larger structures such as cities (De Landa, 2013).

To come back to our first point, in a reality like this, how can standardised, dichotomous logic be applied? It cannot: 'one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad. You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything [...]. Good and bad are only the products of an active and temporary selection, which must be renewed' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 9-10). The *line of flight*, or deterritorialisation / destabilisation, is 'the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21). In other words, it is the concrete possibility of disruption, which is immanent in every entity. For instance, the line of flight can be seen in 'a group of people forming a new political party or planning practitioners conceiving a new form of adaptive strategic spatial planning' (Hillier & Abrahams, 2013, p. 21).

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

To put it differently, in Deleuze and Guattari's work, dichotomous categories such as inside / outside, digital / real, good / bad, immaterial / material do not apply to reality *per se* – in fact, they are superimposed upon it through moral narratives and discourse, which aim at temporary fixing unpredictable reality into strata by trying to avoid the potential danger of instability, or line of flight. These narratives, fixed into strata, do exist and are effective in the sense that they are the temporary result of urban policy compositions and of attempts to carry out planning projects or make decisions, which actually constitute urban planning's own *conatus*, namely its need to survive as a powerful, rational, reassuring, stable system.

What is *conatus*? In Deleuze's (1988) and Spinoza's (2009) words, *conatus* might be described as an entity's 'effort to experience joy, to increase the power of acting, to imagine and find that which is a cause of joy, which maintains and furthers this cause; and also an effort to avert sadness, to imagine and find that which destroys the cause of sadness' (Deleuze, 1988, p. 101). Urban assemblages' *conatus* may take shape when, for example, residents team up to protest against urban renewal or gentrification, communities of people work together for a specific purpose, neighbourhood watches protect their area against crime. On the other hand, planning or urban policy's *conatus* may be to apply the aforementioned binary logic and moral discourses in order to control, prevent disorder as well as regenerate urban spaces. Urban assemblages' *conatus* and planning's or urban policy's *conatus* often differ, and the result of their encounter and negotiation is what an urban space ultimately becomes, what it is stratified, redesigned or regenerated into.

Let us stress that the prolonged, despatialised use of moral narratives and rational discourse, often policymakers' wont, eventually risks widening the gap between planning narratives and space. In fact the latter is already becoming something different by changing its course and enhancing better urban compositions. For instance, by the time a development project is decided, local communities may have organised themselves to protest against the decision; by the time a new security policy is applied to an area, the geography of crime might have changed. As a result, the urban space has become something different from the one initially set by policy. How can policy ultimately compose with a reality like this and work for a shared goal?

These discussions are developed in the next section based on issues of ethics in planning and policymaking: if good and bad are 'only the products of an active and temporary selection' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 10), and every assemblage's *conatus* tend toward its own fulfilment, how can urban policies' moral *good* meet and compose with that, ontologically ethical and much less stable, of urban assemblages? Do the former need to give up some of their power, based upon standardised and categorical reasoning, in order to empower bodies through situated and positive (good) affections? Isn't it going to put the survival of the whole urban and (rational) planning system at risk?

Tedeschi, M.

Towards an ethical and amoral approach to the urban realm

‘In the state of reason, law is an eternal truth, that is, a natural guide for the full development of the power of each individual. In the civil state, law restrains or limits the individual’s power, commands and prohibits, all the more since the power of the whole surpasses that of the individual’ (Deleuze, 1988, p. 107)

The above discussions of the rhizomatic city reveal how elusive it can be to conceive it through predefined categories. Although (urban) planners always aim at the *ideal city* (Gunder & Hillier, 2009) they eventually need fixed terms to execute any development project. What they have to deal with, in reality, is a kind of space that is far from ideal, one where hierarchies are often discarded, where events lack finalism and are mostly unpredictable.

In an attempt to better explore how (urban) bodies are connecting (or not-connecting) among themselves, producing ethical and unpredictable happenings, this paper follows Levi Bryant’s book *The Democracy of Objects* (2011), in which he explores how bodies – termed ‘objects’ – relate to each other by defining their characteristics:

- they are subjectless, and, as such, characterized by their own completely independent existence, entities existing for themselves, which cannot be subsumed as mere *things*, i.e. inferior and opposed to a (typically human) subject. That is to say that there is only one type of being that exists: objects (human beings included).
- They are simultaneously *self-othering* and withdrawing from all relations. This is the reason why human beings cannot have complete access to them, apart from being able to observe their local manifestations. In other words, the bodies’ structure is such that they disclose themselves by displaying their qualities². These qualities are ‘produced out of virtual³ structure as “local manifestations” [...] events, actions or activities on the part of objects’ (Bryant, 2011, p. 31).
- Like Leibniz’s (2007 [1714]) windowless monads, they are operationally closed ‘such that they constitute their own relation and openness to their environment⁴. Relations between objects are accounted for by the manner in which objects transform perturbations from other objects into information or events that select system-states. These information-events [...] are [...] among the agencies that preside over the production of local manifestations in objects’ (Bryant, 2011, p. 31). (The concept of information will be explained below.)

² Bryant refers to Aristotle when developing the relationship between the substance and its quality.

³ Bryant refers to Deleuze when talking about virtualities.

⁴ Bryant refers to Luhmann when speaking of the system, environment, and operation of closure.

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

Taking a narrower view, and according to the Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) as presented by Bryant (2011), the rhizomatic city planners have to deal with can then be more precisely conceived as subjectless, composed of monadic bodies (objects), and characterised more by non-communication than communication, more by closure than openness. It is a reality where the assembling bodies (or objects) are constantly withdrawing from mutual relationships in order to maintain the real possibility to overcome fixed form and evolve into something else. At the same time, they are composing with one another, insofar as the very act of affecting one another does not threaten their survival (i.e. does not lead assemblages to decompose, which happens in case of bad affections).

In his *Ethics*, Spinoza defines the affect as follows: ‘by [affect] I mean the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications’ (Spinoza, 2009 [1677], part III definition III). It is through affections (the result of being affected by a body) that bodies assemble (compose) and separate. The former happens when the affection is amorally considered good, positive (in the sense of empowering) for the individual, and the latter bad, negative (in the sense of deprivation of energy, an escape from contamination due to the contact with other undesired bodies). If we follow this reasoning, good and bad cannot be dichotomous, predefined, moral categories. Rather they must be intensities, affective situated events that occur among bodies.

Indeed, returning to Bryant and Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza, all bodies have and interact through that which Spinoza calls affects. ‘And these affects consist of both an entity’s “receptivity” to other entities and the various capacities an entity has to act’ (Bryant, 2011, p. 117), where *capacity* has nothing to do with the idea of potential or possibility but is closer to the already mentioned Deleuzian concept of virtuality. This idea centres on the notion of being concrete without being actual, of preceding individuality only to become a different actual individual every time, one ready to compose with new, positive assemblages. And the city urban planning and policymaking aim at categorising through fixed moral values is always something else, something more than we can perceive, ready to disrupt the given order. ‘It is only through tracking local manifestations and their variations that we get any sense of the dark volcanic powers harboured’ (Bryant, 2011, p. 281) within urban bodies.

It is exactly by spotting these local manifestations in terms of affects that proper ethical discourse can emerge in urban planning and policymaking narratives. In fact, every object has more or less⁵ moral value (Floridi, 2007), not simply for being (or doing) *good* or *bad*

⁵ ‘The informational nature of an entity that may, in principle, act as a patient of a moral action, is the lowest threshold that constitutes its minimal intrinsic worth’ (Floridi, 2005, p. 13).

Tedeschi, M.

in the traditional categorical sense (Nietzsche, 2007 [1887]), but because of the above-mentioned Spinozist and Deleuzian interpretation of (the temporary result of) the composition of bodies or agreement with their nature⁶.

Strictly speaking, every action, not only those initiated by a human being, has ethical significance in itself (Maturana & Valera, 1980), because it affects (i.e., enters a positive or negative composition with) other objects. The ethics we are talking about here is not, as may have already been guessed, a teleological, dichotomous, human-centred (or self-centred) ethics. Rather it is a subjectless, radical ethics that works in the eventfulness of the city and ‘must take account of the possibilities of ethical action in zones where subjects are not fully given⁷, but where the forces of stabilization, coding, territorialisation and domination at work to construct and configure modes of subjectivation can be negotiated, opposed, resisted, and transmuted. Insofar as ethics is concerned with subjectivity, the problem is not located in debates about how given moral subjects ought to act, but in the interplay of power between forces of domination and possibilities of freedom in the formation of subjects’ (Frohmann, 2007, p. 273).

In other words, in urban planning we need an ethics that is able to acknowledge how bodies are affected, how they compose and decompose, what their lines of flight are, how good and bad might change their morally fixed definitions depending on the singular compositions / decompositions. This is an ethics rooted in the eventfulness of the city, as well as spatially situated. Ethics should stop being a human-centred subject, based on consciousness, but ought to be a result negotiated among bodies in space. But how can planners or policymakers reach decisions if they have to take every singularity into consideration? Isn’t this going to lead to deadlock – an inability to act or to carry out projects?

As this study aims to show, this conception of ethics may certainly represent a huge challenge for urban policies, as well as for planning’s rational systems. It might threaten their survival or mandate radically new rules and approaches. ‘It would be planning

⁶ ‘When we encounter an external body that does not agree with our own (i.e., whose relation does not enter into composition with ours), it is as if the power of that body opposed our power, bringing about a subtraction or a fixation; when this occurs, it may be said that our power of acting is diminished or blocked, and that the corresponding passions are those of sadness. In the contrary case, when we encounter a body that agrees with our nature, one whose relation compounds with ours, we may say that its power is added to ours; the passions that affect us are those of joy, and our power of acting is increased or enhanced’ (Deleuze, 1988, p. 27-28).

⁷ See also Simondon (2007) and his process of individuation, where the individual is not pre-given, never final, but always not-concluded – a reservoir of potentials constantly open to possibilities of further individuation.

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

that [...] devotes its energy to kindling fires for a generalized explosion, to building revolutionary connections among escaped elements [...] so that they can grow strong enough to achieve a breakthrough, to spill out beyond the limit of our current society and into a new land' (Purcell, 2013, p. 35). However, it may be worth taking this risk, starting to see reality from a completely different, radical perspective. Why?

Lured by the illusion (or urge) to control everything⁸, as well as by the need to build the *ideal city*, urban planning and policymaking nowadays interpret the bodies they have to deal with while making no attempt to understand their power to be something else, to become an actual part of their assemblages, to immerse themselves in their continuous movements of composing and decomposing. This is what is dangerous for a system that wants to appear stable and rational. Taking bodies as mere *means to an end* (Heidegger, 1977 [1954], p. 4), where the *means* are to reduce them to manageable and less problematic strata and *end* denotes nothing other than preserving themselves (i.e., urban policies and planning) as fully-working systems from a human-centred, rational perspective. Actually, every urban planning process can be seen as a system that selects and includes from outside only those elements that already exist inside itself (such as good and bad in a *moral* sense – or any such category). This is to ensure the system's survival (*conatus*) and to rule out any external threat by entering a potentially dangerous composition (Bryant, 2011).

What happens now in the case of urban planning and policymaking systems is exactly what Foucault (1978) describes in terms of power effects – which we might even call power *affects*. These systems are such that people should act as docile, passive bodies to be managed, normalised, and included, following standardised moral classification. Put another way, everything is but the means through which power is exercised and generates controllable events. However, being affected by external elements – even in a controlled, regulated manner – cannot but entail the possibility of putting the system at risk: indeed reality cannot be reduced to fixed categories, and any attempt to do so in most cases, simply, fails.

This is why it is worth the risk of taking a completely different approach, one whose binary logic (digital vs. real, inclusion vs. exclusion, good vs. bad, public vs. private, innovative vs. old, secure vs. insecure, integrated vs. marginal, formal vs. informal, rich vs. poor, etc.) is not defined once and for all but it is locally, ethically negotiated among urban assemblages. In this framework, the power (or capacity) to become something else is not normalised but is recognised and empowered. Hence, unpredictable events might be better received and

⁸ 'Making policy is at best a very rough process. Neither social scientists, nor politicians, nor public administrators yet know enough about the social world to avoid repeated error in predicting the consequences of policy moves. A wise policy-maker consequently expects that his policies will achieve only part of what he hopes and at the same time will produce unanticipated consequences he would have preferred to avoid' (Lindblom, 1959, p. 86).

Tedeschi, M.

processed. And the whole urban planning and policymaking systems might more easily open up to new, unexpected possibilities for action.

In this context, what is the role of information? And why is it important to integrate information into a new *ontology* of the city?

The role of information

‘For there to be information presupposes that there is a tension in the system of the being: the information must be inherent in a problematic, since it represents that by which the incompatibility within the unresolved system becomes an organizing dimension in its resolution. The information implies a change of phase in the system because it implies the existence of a primitive preindividual state that is individuated according to the dictates of the emerging organization’ (Simondon, 1992, p. 311)

The concept of information has been taking on increasing significance in recent decades, to such an extent that we are now officially in the so-called *information era*. However, information has ancient roots and has always played a central role in our lives and being in space. As often happens, the etymology of the term reveals hidden, powerful meanings: from the Latin *informare*, to inform means to shape, to form.

This idea is clearly echoed in Simondon’s (2009) line of thought, where information – far from being composed only of immaterial data or being limited to the sphere of technology or media – has primary ontological relevance to our being in the world. It has the actual power to dynamically, ontogenetically shape bodies and their space. In other words, according to Simondon, information takes full part in the process known as individuation, i.e. the being and becoming of bodies in their environment. For Simondon the individual (the body, using Deleuze’s term; the object, in Bryant’s words) is a unity of information system: when a point of the latter is *affected*, information is being spread throughout the organism and becomes a movement. In other words, information is what brings about the process of individuation of a body in its space (Simondon, 2005). It is the agency that, according to Bryant, controls the production of local manifestations in objects (i.e. the results of their virtual structure). In this conception, the individual is ‘grasped as a relative reality, a certain phase of being that supposes a preindividual reality⁹, and that, even after individuation, does not exist on its own, because individuation does not exhaust with one stroke the potentials of preindividual reality. Moreover, that which the individuation makes appear is not only the individual, but also the pair individual–environment. The individual is thus relative in two senses, both because it is not all of the being, and because it is the

⁹ In a way, preindividual reality is in Simondon what virtuality is for Deleuze.

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

result of a state of the being in which it existed neither as individual, nor as principle of individuation' (Simondon, 2009, p. 5).

Again, the Deleuzian idea of virtuality, as well as Bryant's conception of objects' inner power is echoed in Simondon's definition of the individual as non-finished reality always in becoming, ready to follow its line of flight, to change, and to be transformed into something else or compose with new assemblages. In this fashion, we do not analyse the subject in order to understand how it relates to the world outside. Rather, we focus on the process (of individuation), which ignores distinctions between subject and object. We try to grasp how the process itself involves 'different domains such as matter, life, mind and society' (Simondon, 1992, p. 312).

Urban planning and policymaking systems are rooted into the clear distinction (categorisation) subject vs. object as well as a static and moral conception of information. Hence, the philosophy of becoming represents by all means a challenge to the system. However, this challenge can be worth being taken on, as will be further discussed in the article.

If we delve into the city's becoming, we realise that its assemblages attract and actively take part in the process of bodies' individuation. By so doing, they relentlessly generates happenings, which in turn have ethical consequences in the urban realm.

'Ethics is the sense [*le sens*] of an individuation [...] is the sense whereby the interiority of an act expresses a sense in the world outside' (Simondon, 2005, p. 335, author's translation). Hence, urban space is intended as ontologically ethical in the sense that it constitutes the accustomed dwelling, the place bodies are used to. At the same time, it is ontogenetically part of the process of bodies' individuation. The city is and becomes bodies, and vice versa (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015), in relentless movements of information exchange that characterise the very process of individuation of bodies in space. 'We must begin with individuation, with the being grasped at its center and in relation to its spatiality and its becoming, and not by a realized [...] individual faced with a world that is external to it' (Simondon, 1992, p. 310).

Let us take buildings: they individuate themselves into bodies (and vice versa). Hence, whatever shape space may take, the very shaping will eventually (in ethically and amorally good or bad ways) affect the bodies that are meant to compose with it (Deleuze, 1988).

Specifically, let us now consider a space that is classified as dangerous, as an actual threat to safety and security. For instance, many social housing estates, in London, are either considered too run-down to be worth repairing, or are morally stigmatised as criminal (Greater London Authority, Mayor of London, 2005). So do bodies that live there, as a

Tedeschi, M.

consequence. In order to build the utopia of the perfectly secure city (Gunder & Hillier, 2009), which urban planning and policymaking are striving to achieve, all these moral stigmatisations are slowly making social housing disappear. In fact, regeneration is gradually reducing the number of social housing units and the amount of public space, which is also considered ontologically dangerous. Hence, it is constantly under surveillance and, when possible, normalised and framed into rules to design out crime (open spaces, CCTV cameras everywhere, no blind spots, lightning, etc.).

In other words, spaces that play a central role in the process of individuation (of becoming bodies in the environment) are either disappearing or dramatically changing shape. These new-fangled, normalised spaces, in turn, do have a power of individuation. Such power, however, does not include elements like disorder, irregularity, and unpredictability. These spaces are brought about by urban planning's fixed, moral classifications. As such, they do attract normalised bodies, eventually doomed to be afraid of what is different or unexpected (Minton, 2006), in a way that it is still underestimated in the planning field, not fully grasped, and yet to be accurately studied.

However, what happens in reality, beyond these stigmatising narratives and attempts to frame space? As a matter of fact, assemblages of bodies and space actually become criminal (or not) depending on situated information exchanged and layered over time. This exchange is the fuel of the process of individuation. It is ontologically ethical (and amoral) and territorial. It may affect and individuate bodies in space in various ways, depending on the circumstances.

Criminals may individuate and compose with a non-controlling / non-controlled space, be it more or less degraded, because it (apparently) increases their power to act¹⁰. At the same time, low-income residents may compose with that very same space (for example social housing estates), because it is the only space presently affordable to them. Again, in social housing we may find middle-class residents as well, who bought their houses years ago at a great discount through Thatcher's *Right to Buy* policy.

In a nutshell, every single building is multiple, heterogeneous yet unique, always in becoming – and, far from being morally repellent (bad), might assemble in different and unexpected ways with each of the residents. Phrased differently, information exchange between bodies and space is ontogenetic, heterogeneous/multiple, affective, ethical, and situated – in contrast to the moral and fixed judgements (stigma) that have stuck to public spaces and social housing for decades.

¹⁰ We are not going to develop here the whole Spinozist theory of how the amoral ethics has to be applied to offenders.

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

Planning narratives, media/technologies, and local authorities keep fuelling this stigma (i.e. through information fixed / stratified into data) of social housing and (public) space as nests of crime – and anti-social behaviour (ASB), without realising to what extent these narratives, being powerful collections of stratified and decontextualized information, may contribute to actually affecting bodies living in these spaces and their process of individuation, as well as increasing socio-spatial divisions and prejudices.

In London's case both local authorities and the media need such narratives in order to gain and keep full control over space (this is their *conatus*). Full control is maintained by first criminalising (scapegoating) space and then despatialising it, to eventually assure citizens a false sense of security through an embodied utopia. To despatialise space means to modify its power of individuation, its ethical eventfulness by decontextualizing situated and affective information exchanged among assemblages of urban bodies and space, so as to annihilate what is already morally and categorically defined as not controllable, criminal or degraded (which, sometimes, might be an actual part of a space's singularity and character).

This procedure, far from being neutral, affects bodies that are actual parts of these spaces, in the sense that their process of individuation cannot help being modified. Consequently, they may become normalised bodies. On the other hand, trying to control their lines of flight and depriving them of their power to act might provide a false sense of security that, in the long term, is doomed to increase (in)tolerance towards other bodies, fear of what is different, not normalised or the like.

What consequences do these ideas have? First, we can no longer rely on the subject/object dichotomy urban planning and policymaking systems are rooted into. Once this division is overcome, every change in the space has direct and powerful effects (in the sense of affects) on bodies – and, of course, vice versa.

Second, these alterations in bodies and spaces are brought about by the exchange of information between them. Information 'is the tension between two disparate realities [...] is a demand for individuation, for the passage from a metastable system to a stable system; it is never a given thing [...] Information can only be inherent to a problematic; it is that by which the incompatibility of the non-resolved system becomes an organizing dimension in the resolution [...] An information can be said to always be in the present, current, because it is the direction [*sens*] according to which a system individuates itself' (Simondon, 2009, pp. 9-10).

Phrased another way, information is produced spatially every time two or more bodies meet (affecting each other) and compose. It is the dynamical, ethical and situated result of every assemblage. In this sense, if it is stratified, much as a despatialised ethics is transformed into the fixed and moral categories of good and evil (Deleuze, 1988),

Tedeschi, M.

information automatically becomes something else, shorn of its situated and eventful role, and acquires the shape of *data*.

In other words, it becomes fully part of the regimes of information we live in (Elichirigoity, 2007) or, to be more specific, of the control societies (Deleuze, 1995) as entities that detect and modulate these ‘flows of desire, taste, affect¹¹, and other transient personal attributes, but [are] abstracted from individuals and controlled by techniques of aggregation’ (Frohmann, 2007, p. 274). Indeed, according to Deleuze, ‘individuals have become “*dividuals*,” and masses, samples, data, markets and “*banks*” (Deleuze, 1995, p. 5).

Here the data are but interfaces, relentlessly, dynamically producing and fixing themselves in layers of interaction among bodies. The focus here is on how flows of data (interpreting data as an externalisation and stratification of ethical affections through information) operate through bodies, how affective and situated activities, at different levels, contribute to (or are spoiled by) the engineering of actions and policies, and how after-event informational traces, far from disappearing, shape the bodies and their process of individuation (Iliadis, 2013) – and are crystallised in layers of raw data, maps, and statistics that may have, in turn, a specific impact over the whole city.

Technology might play an important role in developing and reengineering these layers, greatly contributing to their steadiness over time and their spread over space: indeed, technology makes informational traces always visible and de-localised, thus having impact (by adding layers) on the very atmosphere of the urban realm. As already mentioned, stigma is a clear example of fixed / stratified information, which has visible consequences on urban spaces and bodies. The former are often regenerated as a result of stigma, whereas bodies can be morally judged and classified on the basis of the (either good or bad) place where they live.

As a matter of fact, just as cities need to guarantee their own good, these regimes (control societies), whose urban planning and policymaking are an actual part, in order to guarantee their continued survival as well-reasoned and efficient systems that control cities, do not intend the flows of information in themselves – as the temporary result of assemblages’ becoming. Instead, falling back on a teleological and self-centred ethics, such regimes treat these flows as the means to an end (Latour, 2002), namely, so as to exercise their own pervasive power. Regimes’ purpose is exactly to use the affects, as well as the ontologically generated information, to include, aggregate, and normalise (Foucault, 1978) bodies and space.

¹¹ Affect is here intended not in the Deleuzian sense, but in the more common sense of emotion.

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

As a result, the new ethics needed for the regimes of information / control societies is an ethics strong enough to ‘tear ourselves away from instrumentality, reaffirm the sovereignty of ends, rediscover Being’ (Latour, 2002), as well as to pinpoint irretrievable ruptures, absences, non-acting, and insufficiencies, as well as non-being – i.e. places that act excluded from ongoing inclusive and normalising processes.

Accepting the ontogenetic role of information, overcoming the subject vs. object separation as well as the predefined moral understanding of the urban realm are serious challenges for urban planning and policymaking rational systems. However, they are needed in order for the latter to stand a chance at dealing with the city’s unpredictable outcomes and its ability of always redefining itself as something different from the given order. Also, these challenges can help the system empower urban bodies’ process of individuation and becoming, instead of only trying to normalise it as potential source of disorder to avoid at all costs.

Conclusions

This study explored an ethical approach to urban planning, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of becoming. The theoretical analysis resulted in these questions: how can a subjectless ethics influence urban planning and policymaking and their relationship with the (rhizomatic) city? What policymakers actually do when classifying and categorising is to exclude reality and proceed using *traditional* ethics, which does not venture into grasping in-between categories but concentrates solely on the aforementioned dichotomies of digital vs. real, inclusion vs. exclusion, good vs. bad, public vs. private, innovative vs. old, secure vs. insecure, integrated vs. marginal, and – last but not least – subject vs. object dualism.

In order for the policy analyst to become aware of things as such, to let these things be, and to act according to their nature, while also minimising bias, what is needed is a non-categorical, non-finalistic, non-human-centred approach. Such an approach would shed new light on failures in (urban) planning, by ethically (in the Spinozist sense) recognising them not as sheer faults to *normalise* at all costs, but as something that might affectively combine with new, un-predictable occurrences into (*good*) assemblages of becoming-interventions.

Therefore, what policymakers and planners ought to do is to ethically and amorally challenge the very system’s rational *conatus*. They could do this by using situated information, the eventfulness of the urban space, and its intrinsic power to be something else, to map urban events in rhizomatic, non-dichotomous ways that open up new possibilities for action.

Tedeschi, M.

References

- › Amin, A., & Thrift, N. (2002). *Reimagining the urban*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- › Anderson, B., Kearnes, M., McFarlane, C. & Swanton, D. (2012). On assemblages and geography. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. 2(2): 171-189.
- › Ansaloni, F., & Tedeschi, M. (2015). Ethics and Spatial Justice: Unfolding Non-Linear Possibilities for Planning Action. *Planning Theory*, advanced online publication. DOI: 10.1177/1473095215591676.
- › Bryant, L. (2011). *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Open Humanities Press/MPublishing.
- › De Landa, M. (2013). *A New Philosophy of Society*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.
- › Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- › Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers.
- › Deleuze, G. (1995). *Negotiations, 1972–1990*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- › Elichirigoity, F. (2007). The Internet, Information Machines, and the Technologies of the Self. In Capurro, R., Frübauer, J., & Hausmanninger, T. (Ed.), *Localizing the Internet: Ethical Issues in Intercultural Perspective* (pp. 289-300). Munich, Germany: Fink.
- › Farias, I. (2009). Decentering the Object of Urban Studies. In Farias, I. & Bender, T. (Ed.), *Urban Assemblages. How Actor-Network-Theory Changes Urban Studies* (pp. 1-24). New York, NY: Routledge.
- › Floridi, L. (2005). Information ethics, its nature and scope. *Computers and Society*. 35(2): 3-21.
- › Floridi, L. (2007). Global Information Ethics: The Importance of Being Environmentally Earnest. *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction*. 3(3): 1-11.
- › Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction – Volume 1*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- › Frohmann, B. (2007). Subjectivity and Information Ethics. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*. 59(2): 267-277.
- › Graham, S., & Marvin, S. (2001). *Splintering Urbanism*. London, UK: Routledge.
- › Greater London Authority, Mayor of London (2005). *The London Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy 2005-2008*. London, UK: Greater London Authority.
- › Gunder, M., & Hillier, J. (2009). *Planning in Ten Words or Less*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- › Heidegger, M. (1977 [1954]). *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. London, UK; New York, NY: Garland Publishing.
- › Hillier, J., & Abrahamas, G. (2013). *Deleuze and Guattari: Jean Hillier in Conversation with Gareth Abrahams*. Wroclaw, Poland: Association of European Schools of Planning.
- › Hirshman, A. (1967). The Principle of the Hiding Hand. *National Affairs*. 6: 10-23.

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL TURN IN URBAN STUDIES: ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CITIES

- › Iliadis, A. (2013). Informational Ontology: the Meaning of Gilbert Simondon's Concept of Individuation. *communication +1*. 2(5): article 5.
- › Latour, B. (2002). Morality and Technology: the Ends of the Means. *Theory, Culture and Society*. 19(5/6): 247-260.
- › Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- › Leibniz, G.W. (2007 [1714]). Monadology. Retrieved April 24, 2015, from <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/leibniz1714b.pdf>
- › Lindblom, C.E. (1959). The Science of "Muddling Through". *Public Administration Review*. 19(2): 79-88.
- › Maturana, H., & Valera, F. (1980 [1973]). Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living. In Cohen, R.S., & Wartofsky, M.W. (Ed.), *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. 42*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel Publishing Co.
- › Minton, A. (2006). *The privatisation of public space*. London, UK: The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.
- › Nietzsche, F. (2007 [1887]). *On the Genealogy of Morality*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- › Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, A. (2015). *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK; New York, NY: Routledge.
- › Proclus, Tarrant, H., & Baltzly, D. (2007). *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus. Volume III Book 3 Part I: Proclus on the World's Body*. Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- › Purcell, M. (2013). A new land: Deleuze and Guattari and planning. *Planning Theory and Practice*. 14(1): 20-38.
- › Simondon, G. (1992). The Genesis of the Individual. In Crary, J., & Kwinter, S. (Eds.), *Incorporations* (pp. 297-319). New York, NY: Zone Books.
- › Simondon, G. (2005). *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. Grenoble, France: Millon.
- › Simondon, G. (2007). *L'individuation psychique et collective: A la lumière des notions de Forme, Information, Potentiel et Métastabilité*. Paris, France: Aubier.
- › Simondon, G. (2009). The position of the problem of ontogenesis. *Parrhesia*. 7: 4-16.
- › Spinoza, B. (2009 [1677]). The Ethics (Ethica More Geometrico Demonstrata). Project Gutenberg. Retrieved April 24, 2015, from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm>
- › Tarde, G. (2000 [1898]). *Social Laws: An Outline of Sociology*. Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books.