Matter Matters
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Review: Ralf Brand and Sara Fregonese, The Radicals' City: Urban Environment, Polarisation, Cohesion**, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013.**

The Radicals' City is a rich and illuminating book on the intricate relations between the urban environment as a material setting, and social and socio-spatial conflict-related phenomena such as radicalization, polarization and social cohesion. Brand and Fregonese's message is simple but raises at the same time profound philosophical and existential questions regarding the human and built environment relations: it invites us to take objects seriously.

For Brand and Fregonese, the urban environment is simultaneously mirror and mediator. Social tensions and conflicts project themselves on the objects of the urban environment, affecting their shapes, locations, dispositions and functions. However, these objects also mediate conflicts by making it easier or harder for specific groups to act in a certain way. They provides opportunities for meeting or for confrontation. This conceptualization of the urban environment, means, for example, when studying graffiti, one needs to be not only attentive to their symbolic message and their location in the city, but also to the kind of paint on the wall where they are drawn. The graffiti's message may mirror the tension of the conflict, its location, the geography of the conflict, while the paint on the wall may mediate the conflict, by rendering the graffiti possible or not (if it is painted in black, for instance), obdurate or easily removable.

Objects are not the "causes" of the conflict and the way it evolves, but neither are they neutral and inconsequential. Understanding this is crucial in an era marked by the rise of the Fortress City (Davis 1990; Graham 2010) with its securitization and anti-terrorism narratives. It allows a critical approach and an alternative to today's dominant near-ideological conceptualizations of radicalization and polarization and their consequences in terms of stigmatization of whole communities, militarization of urban space and control of political space.

In the following, I will go through the book as it is structured and presented, before I discuss the input of this approach on thinking and acting on the urban environment in the context of Arab and Middle Eastern cities.

The Book

The Radical's City is an easy book to read. With its one hundred fifteen figures and illustrations, it makes the message visual and relatively accessible to a lay reader. In fact, it addresses researchers and students interested in urban conflicts, professionals and policymakers involved in urban security but also, as its dedication says, "all who realize that matter matters." The book is structured in three parts. In the first, the authors present the research project. The second part presents four case studies: Belfast, Beirut, Berlin and Amsterdam. The third examines the research findings and presents recommendations for

urban planners and urban security practitioners. The interviews of the last section with major scholars in the field (Bollens, Pullan, Gaffikin and Calame), interestingly materialize the authors' reflexivity and transparency concerns omnipresent throughout.

The representation of polarization as a multiform process allowed the authors to study very different situations with varying polarization "levels:" Belfast and its "Troubles"[1] heritage, Beirut and its civil war history, peaceful Amsterdam and the tensions in some migrants' neighbourhoods, and Berlin and the low-key presence of neo-Nazis in some parts of the city. Through the richly documented case studies, the authors mobilize a diversity of heteroclite "objects" in their analysis of polarization. In Belfast, they identify urban environment's elements like "Peace walls," curb stones and murals that mirror the macro and micro geographies of the conflict at the urban level. In Beirut, they decode the subtle ways the latent conflict projects itself through, studying banal objects like trashcans and the color of stripes in the parking of a mall, as well as the less subtle ones brought by defensive architecture, communitarian marking of territory and militarized urban space. In Berlin, they track neo-Nazis' semiotics geography and modes of operation through café and shop signs' fonts, coded graffiti, particular cloth stores, snow-drawn swastikas, flags and the route and schedule of the U5 metro line. In Amsterdam, they examine how objects like the colour and kind of paint in tunnels, a mosque project, the location of alcohol shops and window openings contribute to the calming or exacerbation of potential and actual intercultural tensions' in the city. They also examine the different roles these objects play during diverse temporalities of the conflict.

One of the most expressive examples of the complexity of objects' role in conflict situations is the sudden rise of communitarian incidents in 2007 near the Westlink motorway separating Catholics and Protestants neighbourhoods in Belfast, after the construction of a pedestrian bridge over the motorway. This bridge should link a large metropolitan hospital on the Catholic side to Protestant neighbourhoods on the other side. However, wheelchair accessibility regulations and requirements, and the need for the building of a ramp led to moving the bridge forty meters away from the initial position traced by urban planners. Overlooking residential neighbourhoods, the bridge thus became an ideal platform for youngsters in their hit-and-run projectiles' launching on the other side. The unforeseen consequences of simple regulations seem to have had more dramatic effects on the lengthy efforts of reconciliation than any particular event or incendiary speech in this period.

In the four case studies, the authors identify different spatial patterns for different degrees of polarization and radicalization. Segregation, grievances, ideological propaganda, recruitment, rallying points and assault strategies are conceived differently and affect different spaces. Belfast represents the extreme case of polarization and radicalization where social segregation is reinforced by material separation elements. The materiality of the conflict—and of the reconciliation effort—concerns first and foremost the areas of the demarcation lines between the Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. This is comparable to Beirut, which is segregated but not partitioned. The demarcation line and the city centre are still the primary areas affected by, and reflecting, communitarian polarizations, but they are not the only ones. Except certain places, like the seaside Corniche strip, practically all public spaces reflect or mediate these polarizations at the macro and micro levels. Even private meeting places like malls, wanting to maintain their "neutrality" are very attentive to the details of their inner built environment (such as the colors of the paint[2]) which should not suggest political affiliation. The case of Beirut is also interesting as it allows questioning the role of temporality. The same built environment, like the city center's streets and public spaces, could encourage occasionally large gatherings, like the demonstrations of 8 and 14 March 2005. It can also restrict access or mobility through defensive space devices, as it has done repeatedly over the last few years. Conversely, in peaceful Amsterdam, polarization is not articulated around identifiable parties and their agendas but rather around cultural differences, such as the tensions between migrant—mainly Muslim—communities' culture

and mainstream Dutch culture. Some migrants' difficulties in articulating their original culture and that of the host society are expressed through, and are affected by, built environment elements. Strategies of occupying, organizing and regulating public and meeting spaces in migrant neighbourhoods and material devices that serve as fixes in such strategies express it clearly. In Berlin, the authors chose to focus on the neo-Nazis radical group, and the way they deploy spatially their social and militant activities. What makes territorialisation particular here is that it does not want to be seen. On the contrary, it seeks to avoid social and state surveillance by developing coded modes of operation and space marking. Consequently, and more than other cases, the semiotic dimension of material objects this group displays—or diverts—in urban space is of strategic importance: it must allow recognition by the insider and evade the untrained eye.

In the last part of the book, the authors go through the twenty-one recommendations of their proposed "Charter for Spaces of Positive Encounter." The charter is divided in three parts: urban environment as mirror, urban environment as mediator, and facilitating friendly encounters. Authors make very interesting recommendations such as their call for devolving the responsibility of building environment-related interventions at the local level. Recommendations seven and eight argue: "Knowledge generated at the micro-level must find ways to move upstream to inform some interventions at higher levels (…) Anti-polarization organizations should be consulted during seemingly ordinary planning processes—and they should proactively seek engagement in such processes." They also underscore how segregation causes polarization, and how the way it is experienced in people's everyday life and concrete practices is crucial. They warn against the obduracy of physical partition elements that can "lag" behind the improvement of the socio-political situation, indirectly perpetuating segregation and hostilities. As for spaces of "friendly encounters," they note how perceived security, equal treatment of communities and groups, and the absence of potentially offending symbols in public spaces, as well as the design process of such spaces are crucial elements for success.

The findings of the authors seem to be shared by the interviewed scholars. As emphasized by Pullan who sees polarization as "primarily spatial," and Bollens who stresses the "power of urbanism," materiality is definitely seen in emerging urban conflict scholarship as a central concern. Authors emphasize: "After some time, most [habits and ingrained routines that develop around changes to the physical environment due to conflict tension] are out of reach from cognitive scrutiny and can turn residents into some kind of somnambulists" (p. 171-172). Understanding the process of polarization and dealing with it is thus crucial for cities: "Almost all cities are characterized by a certain degree of disputes and controversies, but not all of them end up in inferno" (p. 171).

An Inspiring Approach for Analysis of and Action on Urban Environments in Middle Eastern Cities

In those years of ubiquitous unrest and turmoil in Arab and Middle Eastern countries, I believe the idea that polarization could be better dealt with by being more attentive to the urban environment's situation, is quite inspiring, but also very challenging. Of course, countries' strife could hardly be reduced to issues related to built environment's organization. However, ignoring this dimension would be eluding a substantive element for understanding the ways polarization and conflict take place and evolve. In fact, in the whole region, the materiality of urban space is an essential element in the ongoing social mobilizations, the daily evolution of military operations as well as in the deployment of anti-terrorism preventive measures.

Today, there is a large controversy on the rising importance of virtual space and ICT in opening up new channels for political expression and mobilization and, paradoxically new technologies of control. However, lesser importance is given to the physical form of the city

and its role in encouraging or undermining gatherings, stealth movement, barricading, encampment and other tactical activities that seem to have strategic value in the current evolution of political polarizations and conflicts in the region.

Of course, urban form has been long studied as an essential element in conflict situations, especially in urban geography.[3] In the Arab and Middle Eastern region, war-torn cities like Beirut and—more recently—Baghdad have been the "usual suspects" of those studies.[4] But, I believe there is an enormous deficit regarding our understanding of the role urban space's materiality plays in polarization in this region's cities, beyond the particular cases of war conflicts. In fact, few works treat polarization and the city beyond conflict situations. Many authors, based on the study of the demographic, social and economic evolution of the region's countries in the last decades, predicted change. However, the speed and the explosive consequences of such change were never foreseen, neither by academics nor by politicians. Would an analytical approach, like that provided by Brand and Fregonese permit a better understanding of the phenomenon? Would it serve to grasp its actual evolutions in different cities?

Academics, politicians, planning professionals and social activists are now faced with a situation where our knowledge and understanding of the city is not sufficient—or even useful—to grasp the potentialities and consequences of city's form on present socio-political challenges. In fact, our knowledge of the built environment and its socio-political tensions was long dominated by an understanding of the built environment and its production as a mirror-projection of structural social relations and inequalities in space. It is true that Lefebvre's conception of the production of space has made room for the intricate society and built environment relations on the local everyday level, allowing a better understanding of the "city in the making." But, what Brand and Fregonese and other authors propose, inspired by the Actor-Network Theory approach, is definitely a new representation of the built environment as mediator. The urban environment becomes an "actor" not in the sense of an actor with a conscience and will, but in the sense that its very existence and form has consequences.

Methodologically, this means that, in order to understand a certain phenomenon, we should identify the "socio-technical constellation" made of intractably connected human and non-human elements. City places (public spaces, neighbourhoods) and city networks (electricity, sewages, roads) are such kind of constellations. Changes in the physical, symbolic and technical attributes of the non-human elements could have as much, if not more, consequences on the stability, transformation or even disintegration of these constellations, than the desiderata of human actors. This is an excellent framework for mapping and analyzing change, and eventually contributing to it.

The authors' recommendations are also relevant in addressing our actual socio-potical situation. The mobilization of an everyday growing number of new actors in the political—and in some cases, in the security—sphere renders the recommendation defending an enlarged role of the local actors in the transformations of the built environment particularly interesting. In fact, this could contribute to the much-needed pacification of increasingly fragmented and polarized societies. Indeed, pacification goes through answering two pressing and equally important issues: insuring different actors sense a feeling of social and political representation, and the population at large acquires a feeling of security.

Authoritarian regimes in the region have managed to reach long-term peace through insuring security and controlling key players in hierarchal societies. However, today, with the rupture of the political understandings that legitimatized authoritarian regimes, and the rise of political mobilization, security starts to crack and cannot be maintained only through top-down surveillance and military control. In such situations, people and local actors increasingly try to guarantee their security by transforming their immediate built environment, rendering it more

controllable, even defensible. But, the generalization of such situations can increase fragmentation—sometimes segmentation—of the city, and the fall of public order.

I believe, however, that should not necessarily be the case. Governments and public authorities can counter these practices by giving, on one hand, local actors a larger say in the transformations of their local built environment and, on the other hand, providing more creative forms of built environments that a multiplicity of groups and actors can simultaneously use and identify with.[5] Of course, this entails deep changes in political practices such as more participation, and in urban planning interventions such as more place-oriented strategies, articulated with Do-It-Yourself spatial practices.[6] Hence, I would say that, as they contributed to the construction of authoritarian, megalomaniac, oppressive, inequitable, neoliberal and dull urban environments and landscapes, (creative) architecture, urban design and urban planning could also help save cities from "inferno."

My main reservations on the book concern the organic interpretation of communities and groups inherent in the authors' understanding of polarization, as well as the occasional lack of depth in interpreting case studies. Indeed, the authors' interpretation of polarization misses out on the tensions within communities. The latter are presented as homogeneous units, where individuals are assimilated to the groups they are seen they belong to. As for the case studies, while they surely intrigue the reader, they do not fulfil the promise of reconstituting the socio-technical constellations, as the authors commit to in chapter two. Also, they do not go beyond description, and thus do not link coherently with the different observations.

However, I believe the analytical framework provided by Brand and Fregonese is quite inspiring, especially in the actual political context of Arab and Middle Eastern cities. In short, *The Radicals' City* is a welcome addition to the literature on polarization, conflict and urban environment. that will certainly have many echoes.

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Tags:
Polarization. Urban environment. Cohesion. Communities. Security. Beirut. Belfast. Berlin. Amsterdam.

Endnotes:

[1] "Troubles" is the common name given to the ethno-nationalist conflict that erupted in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.
[2] In Lebanon, certain colors are closely linked with dominant communitarian parties; for instance yellow is associated with Hizballah, while blue is associated with Hariri's Future Movement.
[3] These include works that discuss urbicide (Coward 2007) and urban geopolitics (e.g. Graham 2004).

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[4] On Beirut, the works of Fregonese (2009) are representative of this approach. On Baghdad and since the construction of security walls, there has been works questioning the relations between urban form and conflict (Damluji 2010).

[5] A very interesting discussion of such architecture and urban spaces is found in Klauser's (2010). One example is the convention center that allows different shared activities to take place in the same space.

[6] There are different types of Do-it-Yourself approaches, however they all have in common three basic attributes: they are place-based, participatory and rely on available, recyclable resources and knowledge. See Tactical Urbanism, Handmade Urbanism and DIY Urban design.