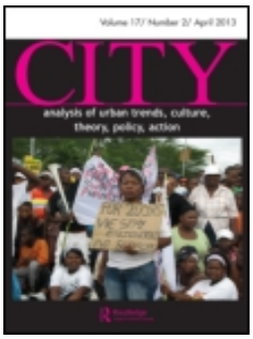

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

City
analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

ISSN: 1360-4813 (Print) 1470-3629 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccit20

Libertarians and Marxists in the 21st century

Thoughts on our contemporary specificities and their relevance to urban studies, as a tribute to Neil Smith

Marcelo Lopes de Souza

To cite this article: Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2012) Libertarians and Marxists in the 21st century, City, 16:6, 692-698, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2012.749582

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2012.749582

City, Vol. 16, No. 6, December 2012

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Libertarians and Marxists in the 21st century

Thoughts on our contemporary specificities and their relevance to urban studies, as a tribute to Neil Smith

Marcelo Lopes de Souza

How to overcome a legacy of prejudices: the burden of the past and the 'generational factor'

Can a left-libertarian scholar pay a sincere tribute to a Marxist colleague and comrade? I think yes, provided that the Marxist scholar is as brilliant, influential and ethically consistent as Neil Smith (1954–2012) was. Although Neil visited Brazil in 1997, to deliver a keynote address at the conference of the National Association of Urban and Regional Research and Planning (ANPUR) in Recife, I did not have the opportunity to talk to him.[1] Nevertheless, some of his works have influenced and inspired me throughout the last two and a half decades.[2] His sudden absence, and at the same time his enduring presence through his work and ideas, give me occasion now to reflect again on the importance of affirming differences in contemporary leftist thinking, but without denying the significance of agreements based upon similarities and potential (even if partial) convergences.

Something has occurred to me again and again in the course of the last few years, and it is now a firm belief in my mind: to some extent, we—contemporary Marxists and libertarians—have inherited animosities and bad feelings that are no longer suitable or justifiable. I have long since observed that many of us (on both sides) are not particularly aware of the intellectual exchanges in the 19th century and early 20th century—nor aware of the fact that personal frustrations and political rivalries greatly exaggerated the abyss between, say, Marx (and Engels) and Proudhon or, to give a further example, between Marx (and Engels) and Bakunin. I am *not* saying that there were no objective and important divergences; rather that objective and important divergences do not necessarily lead to the desire of eliminating (either intellectually or physically) the other!

It is undeniable that both 19th-century Marxism *and* classical anarchism made several mistakes in terms of interpretation and forecast, although relevant aspects in terms of analysis still remain useful and valuable. I really do not see any reason—apart from our own 'political/identitary comfort zone' and 'individual or collective stubbornness'—why both sides cannot come to the conclusion that we still have much to learn from each other …

'Individual and collective stubbornness' and the 'political/identitary comfort zone' are not only matters of (ir)rationality: they are also (perhaps in some cases above all) a matter of generation. As the great physicist Max Planck once remarked, "a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it" (Planck in Kuhn, 1970,

ISSN 1360-4813 print/ISSN 1470-3629 online/12/060692–7
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2012.749582

p. 152). While I would prefer to believe that persuasion and a certain degree of consensus are often possible, Planck's words sound unquestionably realistic.

People who were politically socialised in an age when the memory of Spain and the hot struggles between anarchists and Marxists were a vivid remembrance or reality, understandably have difficulties in seeing the proposed dialogue as useful. It is not only the (last) direct heirs of classical anarchism, but also the neo-anarchists and autonomists who were intellectually and politically socialised before the 1990s that tend to see Marxists as those who perpetrated (or supported) massacres against them and built totalitarian 'real socialism'. Furthermore, Marxists socialised before the 1990s still tend to see libertarians (usually reduced by them to classical anarchists) in the same caricature-like way proposed by Marx and above all by Lenin.

In the mean time, praxis has increasingly ignored these sectarian and largely academic disputes. As I have insisted in a number of texts, many contemporary social movements are largely the product of 'hybridism': libertarian principles and methods (direct action, *autogestion*, horizontality) existing side by side (or mixed) with Marxian or Marxist analysis and concepts. Let us have a look at the Mexican Zapatistas, at Argentina's *piqueteros*, at the German *Autonomen*, at Brazilian *sem-teto* and so on: do they not represent precisely this kind of hybridism? (In contrast to this, Brazilian *sem-terra*, or at least their main organisation MST, have had Marxist and left-wing Catholicism as sources of inspiration; perhaps their verticality has been one of the factors of their recent weakness and vulnerability in the face of the self-professed left-wing federal government under both President Lula da Silva [2003–10] and President Dilma Rousseff [2011–present]).

In many cases, however, we can see attempts to consciously overcome authoritarianism and verticality—that is, Leninism and partly even Marxism in a deeper sense. As for the Zapatistas, for instance, *Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos went to Chiapas to influence and organise the *campesinos*, very much in the old Marxist–Leninist sense. Fortunately, for history and himself, he was himself deeply influenced by his new socio-political environment, and the Zapatistas' wisdom—'*mandar obedecendo*' [to lead by obeying], '*caminando aprendemos*' [we learn while we walk], '*proponer y no imponer*' [to propose, not impose], '*convencer y no vencer*' [to convince, not conquer], '*bajar y no subir*' [to work from below instead of seeking to rise] and, last but not least, '*autonomía*' [autonomy]—is full of libertarian *Geist*. As far as Argentine *piqueteros* are concerned, they are (as Brazilian *sem-teto* also are) a very heteronomous social movement but their most interesting activist organisations (and the intellectuals linked to them) are precious examples of libertarian methods and principles.

These two fundamental identities—'Marxists' and '(left-)libertarians'—are not immutable entities but historical products. Even the names have been submitted to several changes in the course of time: 'anarchists' were not widely known under this label before the 1870s (although Proudhon had already proudly declared "I am an anarchist!") and until the time of the Commune of Paris they were usually known as 'federalists'[3]) the word 'libertarian', coined by Joseph Déjacque in a letter to Proudhon to refer precisely to the anarchists, has been partly usurped by right-wing forces, ultraliberal movements and parties in the USA (and fortunately almost only there);[4] the terms 'Marxist' and 'social democrat' were synonymous at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, an equation which was later destroyed. Furthermore, we should not forget that the workers' movement produced a plethora of streams and groups in the 19th century. During the famous Commune of Paris, for instance, neither anarchists nor Marxists were particularly influential (although Marx tried to influence the events from London, and some disciples of Proudhon and Bakunin were among the

communards). The *blanquistes* were much more important then, but they simply disappeared as a political force later. Last but not least, we certainly cannot forget that there have always been divergences among the libertarians themselves, as well as among the Marxists …

From mortal enemies to 'cousins' engaged in a tense and constructive dialogue/ partnership?

I have always regarded divergences in the interior of the libertarian milieu—for instance, the several important differences between, say, Cornelius Castoriadis and the classical anarchists, or between Bookchin and Castoriadis—as divergences between 'brothers', even if the protagonists themselves did not, or have not, seen things this way (often due to their egocentrism or to personal or political rivalries). What about our divergences with Marxists? Élisée Reclus called the 'state socialists' his 'brothers' when he made a speech in 1894:

> 'This is what we keep saying to our brothers—sometimes feuding brothers—the state socialists: "Watch your bosses and representatives! Like you, certainly, they are animated by the purest of intentions; they fervently want the abolition of private property and state tyranny, but the relationships, the new conditions gradually change them; their morality changes with their interests, and, still believing himself faithful to the cause of their constituents, they inevitably become infidels. Also, those in power, will use the instruments of power: military, moralists, magistrates, police and informers."'[5] (1896, p. 10)

Those words were proffered long before anarchists were massively executed by 'state socialists' during the civil war in Russia and later in Spain. Nevertheless, and be that as it may, if it is evident that anarchists, neo-anarchists and autonomists should see each other as 'brothers', why is it then so difficult for many Marxists and libertarians to conceive each other at least as 'cousins', the errors and crimes of the past notwithstanding? After all, in spite of all the disagreements in relation to the *means*, there has always been a remarkable, though by no means total, convergence in terms of *ends*. In 1873, Kropotkin went as far as to insist (slightly exaggerating, of course) that socialists of 'the most varied shades' shared a 'rather complete agreement in their ideals' (Kropotkin in Fleming, 1988, p. 21).

Moreover, and perhaps interestingly or surprisingly, I feel ethically closer to several heterodox Marxists (namely, council communists such as Anton Pannekoek and Karl Korsch, or some honest, coherent and brilliant academics like Edward P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Herbert Marcuse and our late colleague, geographer Neil Smith) than to an 'individualist anarchist' such as Max Stirner. In light of this, and with expectation of some reciprocity, I just wish that our contemporary, heterodox Marxist 'cousins' could acknowledge that they have more in common with Élisée Reclus, Piotr Kropotkin, Murray Bookchin, Colin Ward or Noam Chomsky than with, say, Georgi Plekhanov, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky or Ernest Mandel, etc.

City has already done a lot in recent years to build a kind of critical pluralism precisely on the basis of this commitment to dialogue between Marxists and libertarians. Tensions exist now, and will remain in the future, as long as objective divergences exist. But it is possible and desirable that we develop a kind of 'unity in diversity', even without building a 'united front' in the old, naive or opportunistic sense, and even without denying the fruitfulness of otherness. On the basis of a respectful and productive dialogue, both sides can become a little wiser in order to improve their real and potential contribution to intellectual and political challenges such as (re-)building the political economy without an 'economist' bias; valuing culture (or the 'imaginary', as Castoriadis would say) without entering the trap of

culturalism; overcoming the structures/agents dichotomy; valuing different struggles, agendas and movements and trying to contribute to non-reductionist articulations (instead of overvaluing one of them at the cost of neglecting or subordinating the others); understanding the relationships between 'direct action' and 'institutional struggle' in a more productive and less dogmatic way; and, last but not least, understanding more and more the relevance of the spatial dimension of society, for instance, the role of the social construction of scale and the politics of scale—a task to which Neil Smith contributed in a deep and original way (see, for instance, Smith, 1990, 1992, 1993, 2004).

For many decades, urban studies has been a privileged academic arena in which theoretical controversies around these questions have emerged again and again. Unfortunately, and despite some advances and cumulated knowledge, theoretical discourse (critical urban theory included) remains fragmented in a number of largely self-referential intellectual niches. From my point of view, however, it is clear that this dialogue between libertarians and Marxists, and the synergies it promises, is crucially relevant not only for the sake of theory building (in urban studies and in social sciences in general), but for the sake of praxis—and as a plain matter of *learning from* praxis. The challenge represented by gentrification, discussed by Smith in a number of influential works (such as Smith and Williams, 1986; Smith, 1996) is one of the many contemporary examples which constantly remind us of the importance of this.

Towards a (partial) libertarian turn?

Geography and sociology's 'radical turn' in the 1970s was actually a *Marxist* turn. Not much attention was devoted to libertarian traditions then. In the new framework of the last two decades however, left-libertarian authors have been occasionally (re)discovered—from Reclus and Kropotkin to more contemporary authors such as Castoriadis and Bookchin—although partly much more *outside* than *inside* the disciplinary fields closely related to socio-spatial research in general and to urban studies in particular: geography and sociology. In many cases, these libertarian authors and their ideas have been regarded more as interesting 'artefacts' in a 'museum' of radical thought, than as 'weapons' in an 'arsenal'.

Has the situation changed since the 1970s and 1980s? Actually, not very much—at least until the turn of the century. In a paper on the 'Poverty of Radical Theory Today', published at the beginning of last decade, Michael Storper addressed problems that he labelled the 'false promises of Marxism' and the 'mirage of the cultural turn'. Although Storper, at the end of his paper, makes a few suggestions aimed at renewing the radical agenda, libertarian thought is totally absent from his field of vision (2001). Two years later, in a chapter under the apparently comprehensive title 'Socialist Geography', Scott Salmon and Andrew Herod claim to recognise that no single term—such as 'radical', 'socialist', 'Marxist' or 'critical'—"can accurately capture the diversity of knowledge production on the geographic left" (2003, p. 210). Such a statement, however, sounds less convincing in the light of some scandalous omissions: the authors only mention Kropotkin once—"[a]s leftist geographers became more versed in social theory and began to read not just Marx but, among others, Weber, Durkheim, Kropotkin, Luxemburg, Sartre, Freud, Foucault, and Habermas, the radical project was both expanded and increasingly contested" (p. 211)—and they do not include him in the list of references. In addition to this, neither Reclus nor contemporary libertarian geographers and non-geographers such as Bookchin are even mentioned.

On the other hand, things have dramatically changed outside academia since the 1990s. If it is true that we live in an 'age of generalised conformism', as Castoriadis said in the 1980s (1990), it is also true that we have experienced, particularly since the last decade of the 20th century, the rise of new radical social

movements and the emergence of new or renewed approaches to socio-spatial change. From Zapatistas and *piqueteros*, to *Autonomen* and the alter-globalisation movement; from the Brazilian *sem-terra* and *sem-teto* to the civil unrest in Greece and the *indignados*; we can see that conformism is by no means *absolute*, even if it is 'generalised'. Capitalism's ability to 'tame' or 'domesticate' people cannot be underestimated, but it should not be overestimated either: the last two decades have proved this.

As previously stated, many of these movements and thinkers are clearly, or at least partly, left-libertarian in their identity and nature, while many of them, on the other hand, still present Marxist, and often even Leninist, discursive and/or practical elements (although in many cases we can see vigorous attempts to consciously overcome 'state-centrism', verticality and the hierarchical thinking which has been typical of Leninism and at least to a large extent to Marxism in general). Marxist scholars cannot ignore or underestimate these facts, and it is one of the libertarians' tasks to show them the limits of strategies such as 'prophetic updating'—Marxists' attempt to revitalise Marx's doctrine by persuading us that capitalism's contradictions and problems, for instance, the 2008 more-than-financial crisis, justify the assumption that Marxism can regenerate itself from inside and cannot be surpassed from outside, as if neither Marxist [–Leninist] politics nor Marxist theory have showed any problems or shortcomings—and 'mimicry'—the borrowing of traditional libertarian principles and methods, such as self-management and autonomy, to 'revitalise' Marxism, whilst usually 'forgetting' to pay any tribute to the ancient libertarian roots of the ideas. Marxism probably still has some relevant role to play as a source of inspiration for radical thinking in the years to come; it would be foolish to deny it. Clearly, what Marxists no longer have is the ground to believe that they can have the monopoly of critical theory—not to mention insurgent praxis.

The scenario of a widespread 'libertarian turn', similar to the 'radical turn' of the 1970s, is for several reasons unlikely. Nevertheless, considering some current trends, the hypothesis of a 'medium-sized' 'libertarian turn' (probably as an important part of a broader re-emergence of radical ideas) is totally plausible. As a matter of fact, my thesis is that such a partial 'libertarian turn' is already underway. The next few years will most likely be years of economic crisis, social unrest and state repression worldwide; but also a time of creative struggle and new socio-political experiments. Libertarian ideas, theories and praxis will certainly have a place in this framework, as they have already had since the 1990s. How can socio-spatial research in general and urban studies in particular help us to *understand* (and perhaps *inspire* or at least *support*) these possible scenarios?...

In one of his memorable texts on the problem of geographical scale and its uses, Neil Smith opens the Conclusion with the following paragraph:

> Vladimir Lenin famously upended Hegel's argument that space eclipses historical time as the state evolves as master of all space. Instead, under socialism, Lenin (...) argued, the state will wither away. An organ of class oppression, its function fades with the fading of class differences. Lenin's anticipation of the withering away of the state was certainly powered by a sense of agency—a politically mobilized international working class, and carried with it a certain optimism—the world can be made to look very different. Yet fairly or otherwise, Lenin is widely criticized for a certain utopian globalism, and his ambition of a withering state is rarely given voice today except as an object of scorn or nostalgia. The remarkable thing, however, is the virtual reinvention of Lenin's idea at the opposite end of the political spectrum. A left that used to champion the withering away of the state has now evolved, in the context of globalization, into the state's apparent defender, whether buttressed by Hegelian philosophy or liberal sentiment. By contrast,

> fantasies of the withering away of the state are now the enthusiastic preserve of bankers, financial capitalists, business school professors, and right-wing ideologues preaching free market neo-liberalism and global deregulation. (…) (Smith, 2004, p. 207)

In saying this, Neil Smith confronted his readers with one of the most embarrassing contradictions of our time, both academically and in practical and political terms. Obviously, in contrast to him, I believe that this contradictory situation, in the context of which the question about the 'progressive' character of the capitalist state (or of the state apparatus at large) has received curious (either implicit or explicit) answers on the part of many left-wing intellectuals since the 1990s, cannot be appropriately addressed on the basis of Marxism—which has been more often than not deeply contradictory (or ambiguous) on this matter, beginning with Marx himself. In spite of its weaknesses (especially if we think on classical anarchism), I firmly believe that libertarian principles, thought and praxis correspond to a privileged key to overcome problems such as this. And that is crucial for any critical socio-spatial research, urban studies included. Nonetheless, the fact that Neil Smith bravely put his finger on the wound is very remarkable in itself. For this and much more, he was and is somebody to be seen and remembered as a challenge to all non-dogmatic libertarians as a true comrade.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Emma Cummins, David Madden and Bob Catterall for orthographic corrections and stylistic suggestions.

Notes

1 Neil Smith's keynote address, at the conference of the National Association of Urban and Regional Research and Planning (ANPUR) in Recife in 1997, was titled 'Satanic Geographies of Globalization, or, The Territorial Imperative of Capital'.

2 Neil Smith's book *Uneven Development* (1990 [1984]) was translated into Portuguese at the end of the 1990s, and the author has been well known among Brazilian geographers since then. At the time when he was invited to deliver that keynote address at the ANPUR conference, he was already surely one of the best-known Anglo-Saxon geographers in Brazil.

3 As George Woodcock stressed, 'Proudhon had called himself an anarchist in 1840, but it was not until the late 1870s that the French, Spanish, Italian, and Swiss internationalists who had remained close to Bakunin eventually adopted the name for themselves' (1988, p. 13).

4 As for me, I have proposed to extend the adjective 'libertarian' (or 'left-libertarian', in the US-American parlance) to autonomists such as Cornelius Castoriadis as well.

5 French original: 'C'est là ce que nous répétons sans cesse à nos frères,—parfois des frères ennemis—les socialistes d'État: "Prenez garde à vos chefs et mandataires! Comme vous, certainement, ils sont animés des plus pures intentions; ils veulent ardemment la suppression de la propriété privée et de l'État tyrannique; mais les relations, les conditions nouvelles les modifient peu à peu; leur morale change avec leurs intérêts, et, se croyant toujours fidèles à la cause de leurs mandants, ils deviennent forcément infidèles. Eux aussi, détenteurs du pouvoir, devront se servir des instruments du pouvoir: armée, moralistes, magistrats, policiers et mouchards"'.

References

Castoriadis, C. (1990 [1989]) 'L'époque du conformisme généralisé' [The age of generalised conformism], in *Le monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III*, pp. 11–24. Paris: Seuil.

Fleming, M. (1988) *The Geography of Freedom: The Odyssey of Élisée Reclus*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Kuhn, T. (1970 [1962]) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reclus, E. (1896 [1894]) *L'Anarchie*. Paris: Éditions des, '*Temps Nouveaux*' [facsimile reproduction: Librairie Nationale Française, http://gallica.bnf.fr].

Salmon, S. and Herod, A. (2003) 'Socialist geography', in G.L. Gaile and C.J. Willmott (eds) *Geography in America at the Dawn of the 21st Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, N. (1990 [1984]) *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Blackwell [Brazilian edition: *Desenvolvimento desigual: Natureza, capital e a produção do espaço*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 1988].

Smith, N. (1992) 'Geography, difference and the politics of scale', in J. Doherty, E. Graham and M. Malek

(eds) *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Smith, N. (1993) 'Homeless/global: scaling places', in J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson and L. Tickner (eds) *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London: Routledge.
Smith, N. (1996) *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London: Routledge.
Smith, N. (2004) 'Scale bending and the fate of the national', in E. Sheppard and R. McMaster (eds) *Scale and Geographic Inquiry*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Smith, N. and Williams, P., eds (1986) *Gentrification of the City*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
Storper, M. (2001) 'The poverty of radical theory today: from the false promises of Marxism to the mirage of the cultural turn', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25(1), pp. 155–179.
Woodcock, G. (1988) 'Elisée Reclus: an introduction', in M. Fleming, *The Geography of Freedom: The Odyssey of Élisée Reclus*, pp. 11–16. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Marcelo Lopes de Souza is a professor at the Department of Geography of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Email: mlopesdesouza@terra.com.br