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Climate Turn

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# EDITORIAL

Since the late 1980s, warnings started being raised by scientists about the warming of the planet and the fundamental role of human actions in this process. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in 1992, also known as the Rio Summit, the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established, leading then to the negotiation of the Kyoto Protocol. Climate change, since then, started to gain relevance as a security problem, and many more international meetings and associations were held and established.

This turn has indeed given attention and prominence to the dramatic transformation of climate and the disruptions of the environment caused by anthropogenic activities on earth. Extraction of fossil fuels, pollution and greenhouse gases emissions, deforestation, and other elements of capitalist economic expansion, industrialisation and urbanisation at the global scale have almost irremediably altered the fragile balance that makes the conditions of life on earth possible.

While we write, another UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), defined as the world's '[last best hope](#)', is ongoing in Glasgow with the specific aims to reduce emissions, maintain global warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius, and provide economic support to developing countries. While criticisms point to the lack of effective initiatives to cut the burning of fossil fuel by part of the major emitters, COP26 reveals the stark reality of a climatic disaster not faced adequately.

One of the main problems in addressing the present crisis regards the tendency to focus on individual behaviours and responsibility, instead of putting into discussion the system which frames these behaviours. As an example, while plenty of attention is given to how correctly waste sorting is done by people, little progress has been made about the excessive use of

plastic and film by food companies. As George Monbiot rightly wrote, "capitalism is killing the planet" while we are distracted using recyclable straws and tote bags ([Monbiot 2021](#)), without discussing the social, political and economic system that creates and defines the conditions for consumption in the first place.

The increasing urbanisation of the world has created a situation of interconnection between city environments in need to secure and widen their commodity chains, energy supplies, mobility networks, leading to the conceptualisation of the term *glurbanisation*, to indicate the new condition characterising humanity. This process has to be considered the main reason for the dramatic and irreversible transformation of the biosphere, and consequently of the conditions of life on earth.

Indeed, the *turn* we want to emphasize here has to do with the fundamental need to see climate nowadays as a prism through which we can better understand present political, economic, and social phenomena. With this special issue, specifically, we want to focus on climate as a new framework to analyse the urban question, and we offer an interpretation of the present climate crisis as a key lens to comprehend present forms of inequalities, injustice and vulnerabilities at the local and global levels.

From one side, *glurban* populations' lifestyle in the global north has impacted the most on the alteration of the biosphere and the climate, while technology and resources keep them able to adapt and/or respond to environmental transformations. On the other side, it is clear that the degree of vulnerability people face in relation to climate transformation is hardly related to the impact their lives have on climate change in the first place. Experiences of past and present forms of colonialism, dispossession, land grabbing and exploitation have created the conditions for certain areas to suffer most from environmental

disruption.

While the mainstream discourse on the climate crisis points to its presumed effects on the raise of conflicts in poor countries in the global south, their spillover effects, and future apocalyptic scenarios of hordes of so-called “climate refugees”, capitalist *glurbanisation* keeps growing, consuming the earth’s resources and emitting carbon dioxide.

The collection of articles in this special issue focuses on global cities and urbanisation in its multifarious forms and aspects, a most needed approach in order to better understand the complex configuration of the present climate crisis. Contributors have looked at capitalist *glurbanisation* as the key driver of the crisis, as well as underling the potential of cities as hubs of radical and virtuous transformation and creation of solutions, however conflicting.

In addition, contributions tackle the differential impact of environmental disruption in global cities in the north and in the south, highlighting the way in which new forms of injustice and inequalities are now articulating around the climate issue. The open geographies emerging from the issue could be finally interpreted as a mirror of such imbalances: at the microlevel of everyday life in Asian, South American or African cities we can see the long wave effects of global economic processes, which still claim for a radical, critical and just interpretation of concepts such as sustainability, resilience, adaptation. The collection points to diverse forms of environmental injustice, which intersect with pre-existing spatial and social divides, economic inequalities, and limits to mobility, creating novel intersectional ecologies.

The issue opens with the article by Sarah Walker and Elena Giacomelli, presenting insights from fieldwork in Dakar. The authors point to the unhealthy city environment as an evidence of an uneven distribution of the right to live in

a healthy environment. They show how past and present colonial processes have impacted on places and on the (im)possibility, for some people, to access mobility as a form of resistance to climate change. Drawing on postcolonial literature, they allow inequalities in adaptation capacity to emerge, linking them to historical global relations of exploitation and showing the uneven impact of the climate crisis.

Fausto Di Quarto’s paper follows and leads us to a critical analysis of the failure of discourses and investigations on the ecological crisis. Di Quarto underlines how nature and discourses around it have been depoliticized and became technocratic, hiding nature’s intrinsic political character. In line with our premises, the author points to the urban process as “the most disruptive metabolic engine ever invented by societies”, showing how hypocritical it is to face the climate crisis without discussing the flows that continuously enter and exit cities worldwide.

The following two articles, although focused on different contexts, form a dialogue on the often unjust interventions to face environmental disruption. Informal settlements, generally more vulnerable to “natural” disasters (that are of anthropogenic nature, therefore not natural at all) and climate change, are often the target of resilience policies that see their presence as risky and unmanageable, leading to evictions and dismantling of informal shelters or squatted camps.

Giuseppina Forte describes the contrasting understanding of ‘uninhabitable spaces’ by Brazilian authorities – whose aim is to secure space from disasters – and dwellers, specifically Black women living in a squatter camp in the periphery of São Paulo, whose livelihoods are strongly entangled with the space they inhabit. The author, through insights derived from her fieldwork, shows how environmental injustice is not just related to vulnerability to hazards, but

also to adaptation strategies like evictions. What is dismissively defined 'uninhabitable' has to be understood as a space of intimacy, of domesticity, where the risks implied by floods and other disasters are normalized in comparison to other economic or housing risks.

The concept of peripherality is key in Francesco Pasta's paper, in which he analyzes forms of resistance in low income informal settlements in the South East Asian megacities of Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok, focusing on flood risk mitigation and waterside informal settlements. Different experiences across the three contexts are united by the same logic and resilience discourse that link peripherality and informality with risk. This process produces what the author defines as 'hazardscapes' which reflect and reproduce pre-existing socio-spatial inequalities and injustice.

The closing contribution shifts our gaze to global cities and their future: Marcello Di Paola looks at the hazardous combination of green and smart ideas and projects for the sustainability and the survival of cities. His paper underlines the

challenges contemporary cities face due to the growing urban population and point to neighborhood practices, combine with technological solutions, as possible ways out of the crisis.

Overall, a strong critique emerges from the collection, regarding the unequal impact of the climate crisis and directed at both environmental discourse and practices. From one side, we clearly see the unfolding of the crisis in vulnerable contexts where the poorest and most marginalized are in high situations of risk. From the other side, we recognize both a discourse that reproduces divides by linking social and spatial marginality with risk, and adaptation practices that recreate conditions of precarity and impoverishment. In the meantime, the real problems, regarding the exploitation of nature, capitalist extractivism, and Western forms of consumption, are not seriously tackled and the 'right to breath' (Mbebe 2020) recalled in Walker and Giacomelli's article, remains a privilege of few.

A.C. & C.M.