ENVISIONING THE CITY OF THE FUTURE: KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES VS. ENTERTAINMENT SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

The envisioning of the city of the future deals with several considerations in regards to economic, political, educational and social welfare. We are increasingly living in a world full of information, but that still lacks of some basic instruments to become great in respect of human welfare, dignity and knowledge. A vision of a 21st century modern city is presented in this paper as part of a global vision that tends to ideologically encourage the creation of knowledge societies but that in reality is creating something else, a paradigm of what some scholars have called "entertainment societies".

KEYWORDS

Entertainment Societies, Knowledge Societies, Human Rights, Modern Cities, Social Welfare, Technology

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, several cities have been recognized as the most important of their time since they depicted vanguard, whether that was in social, political, demographic or economic terms. Great examples of that are the old Athens and Sparta, Alexandria with its marvelous library, Babylon or Jerusalem. Back then, the notion of "city of the future" was forged around the possibility of maintaining an autonomous and self-sufficient social order that could satisfy the basic needs of an increasing population. One could argue the same basic idea is still valid in our times, but there are some specific aspects to point out. Such considerations will be briefly described in this paper.

2. BODY

Before the modern State was defined, cities planned their activities around the fulfillment of the needs of the population as proof of independence and self-sufficiency versus other cities and civilizations; in other words, they looked after their problems only to show their capacity to manage themselves internally. As social and political structures transformed by the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, within the frame of the modern State, cities were obliged to guarantee the satisfaction and resolution of some basic needs and problems of their inhabitants, clearly shown by 2 major concerns:

a) The safeguarding of social welfare by the means of public activity, and the satisfaction of particular needs (security, sanitation, trash collection, public lighting, to name a few), and
b) The satisfaction of the needs of groups in relative economic disadvantage (with emphasis on extreme poverty, indigents and children living on the streets, among others).

This vision of guardian of social welfare and guarantor of some minimum living conditions is what should prevail in modern cities in the 21st century with knowledge societies; and it is through the municipal sphere that an effective response can be achieved to fulfill the needs of individuals. Cities of the future must have a very close relationship with their inhabitants to know what the public needs to satisfy are, and they

also should have the right mechanisms to do so. This can be achieved by contemplating different angles within the political and legal systems, such as the rational and optimal use of resources, the establishment of urban sustainability through strategic planning, and by encouraging a service economy, just to list some.

The understanding of these needs led me to appreciate the equally important roles that disciplines like finance, law, and economics play in the knowledge societies and in the innovation process for human kind. Yet, innovation itself is a necessity more than a luxury: companies do it for profit, but mankind needs it for long-term survival.

Along with the search for alternative and renewable energy sources, modern society faces a swath of tough challenges that are trans-disciplinary in nature. In the sake of sustainability, the future to come has to witness a rethinking of the infrastructure and systems employed to provide transport, nutrition, housing, education and healthcare to a population of over 7 billion.

As I mentioned earlier, companies innovate for a profit, and so much of this systems overhaul I refer to has been the result of the creative coupling of new and existing technologies to gain economic or strategic advantage in a determined market. Nevertheless, I believe a much more methodical approach could and ought to be followed, one with central focus in addressing the shortcomings of current societal systems and that, much like economics, considers the micro- and macro- impacts of technical solutions and their implementation. This approach —which I deem critical in a world craving for sustainability— is what I want to advocate for through research that not only drives the policy-making process, but that identifies the means to put innovation into effect, whether through creative new businesses, state sponsored schemes, public-private partnerships or combinations thereof.

But, how on earth does the knowledge societies may come to exist if the cornerstone represented by fundamental rights do not appear within the information societies?

I would argue that as modern societies we need to request the United Nations to call for the enactment of an International Pact on Human Rights; we would need to demand such document to include the principles contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as the content of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

This premise shall be formulated based on the universal principle of human rights, as well as in the idea of generating a culture of respect towards them with no special hierarchy. Vienna's 1993 World Conference on Human Rights was designed to solve the problems in the adoption of the previously mentioned agreements, by establishing that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. However, it seems to me that in reality, the international community does not treat human rights in a global, fair and equitable way, weighting and respecting them all equally.

By proposing to group together the contents of both Covenants I referred to before in an International Pact on Human Rights, I would be aiming to homogenize in one single international document such freedoms, arranging them alphabetically, with no hierarchy and in a whole unit of obligations for the member States of the United Nations. This might be seen as just a semantic matter, but giving order to the Universal System of Human Rights would mean proof of a real concern and interest in achieving the efficient protection of human dignity, as well as the advancement of fundamental rights in the XXI century.

In addition, we should advocate for new technologies, policies and businesses that address the deficiencies of contemporary human systems in a variety of fields.

But while doing so, we cannot continue to reduce the humanities and the arts from primary and secondary schools in order to let the technological approach to prevail. As Martha Nussbaum states:

"We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance… Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world´s democracies hangs in the balance." (Nussbaum, 2010).

Consequently, societies are not becoming learning societies. Technology is thus a tool for entertainment and not for transformation of information into knowledge, and of knowledge into more and new knowledge. Citizens' lack of academic and cultural means to take good and informed decisions that could permeate into society through public policies are in scarcity mode.

It could be argued then that "the internet [and social media technologies] can therefore… become both an instrument for the building of knowledge societies and a labyrinth that will lead us slowly but surely to the shores –enchanted or disenchanted – of the entertainment society." (UNESCO, 2005).

In general, countries worldwide and international organizations do not know how to make the technological division between the industrialized and the under developed countries. But even within the developed countries, we often discover that the information societies are compromised since their inhabitants are not capable of filtering the huge amount of content, data and information they are surrounded by. Such citizens do not present the necessary skills to learn by classifying and selecting the appropriate information.

In my view, so far there is no social inclusion for learning and for building knowledge societies through the use of technologies, social media and social networking. We strongly require to turn back to traditional ways of learning, which usually include firsthand knowledge acquisition for developing democratic and mathematical skills to select adequate information, that will allow us to create accurate knowledge and to produce intangible capitals in our particular environments.

3. CONCLUSION

More personally, I see a city of the future as one that listens to the call of their citizens, gathering their input on the common problems; what I am thinking here are the likes of deficient public transport, access to drinking water or even food supply. A city that faces these everyday problems through dialogue, listening to the proposals emanating from its citizens, based on scientific and technological developments and with a solid legal system that safeguards their fundamental human rights, is what I would call a city of the future in the 21st century, thus a city with a knowledge society.

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