How "Urban" Is Urban Policy Making?

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Contemporary cities are both creators and receptors of global-scale collective problems. City-dwellers must cope with such far-reaching transformations that affect their communities and yet lie beyond the full jurisdiction of local administrations. Starting from this conundrum, this article seeks to answer the following questions: What is distinctive about urban policy making? What are its typical constraints and opportunities? To capture these details, I use the concepts of *density* and *multi-scalarity*, which briefly denote that cities are sites of dense relational networks that articulate over multiple territorial scales. The analysis unfolds through the prism of immigration as a paradigmatic urban issue and observes city governments and social movements as complementary agents in urban policy making. Human mobility is, in fact, a worldwide phenomenon that has profound consequences in cities of transit or settlement. Whereas citizenship and immigration are primarily prerogatives of central states, municipalities and activists crucially affect the lives of migrants, often stretching, countering, or circumventing supralocal provisions. To illustrate these points, the article draws on fieldwork carried out in 2017–2019 in two large south European cities led by progressive governments: Milan and Barcelona.

CITIES UNDER PRESSURE

What defines a city as such is the geographical concentration of numerous and diverse people in restricted areas (Wirth 1938). In densely populated spaces, societal change tends to be more rapid, abrupt, profound, and—ultimately—difficult to govern. Contemporary globalization has possibly accentuated the vulnerability of cities because worldwide phenomena first become manifest within the urban environment. Global cities tend to cluster economic activities within their territories, with dramatic consequences in terms of social inequalities, both between and within cities. The case of immigrants seeking employment and/or protection is emblematic. The postindustrial restructuring of cities—in the Global North especially—has worked as a magnet for both high- and low-skilled workers of the service economy (Schiller and Çağlar 2009), thereby breeding spatial segregation, social exclusion, and humanitarian crises.

However, the chaotic, seemingly ungovernable character of urban societies does not only depend on global-market forces; political processes also play a decisive role. The complexity of urban governance indeed is magnified by the multiple tiers of government and spheres of power that are conflated in cities. First, policy problems arise at different territorial scales; therefore, "issues of jurisdictional design are fractal" (Hooghe and Marks 2003, 234). The multilevel-governance concept—first crafted in the field of European Union (EU) studies—reflects this concern for proliferating, interdependent jurisdictions (Bache and Flinders 2004). Moreover, interactions among governmental players at various levels do not unfold on an even field. Both European and US city governments are constitutionally inferior to and dependent on nation-states (Kübler and Pagano 2012); thus, local governments are keen to select policy alternatives that are deemed compatible with supralocal provisions (Liu et al. 2010). As a consequence of these power asymmetries, when higher tiers of government are unable or unwilling to tackle emerging public problems, their solution ultimately depends on the agency of local actors.

Such dynamics were apparent during the so-called European "refugee crisis." Following the political upheavals that erupted in Northern Africa and the Middle East in late 2010 (i.e., the Arab Spring), millions of migrants reached Europe or lost their lives trying. Drawing on the thesis popularized by Castles (2004), the responses enacted by the EU and its member states can be regarded as "policy failures." The Dublin Regulation, a key component of the Common European Asylum System, provides that asylum seekers should submit their protection request in the first country of arrival. This rule has put frontline south European states under severe strain because migrants have been forced to request sanctuary there. Rising levels of policing at the borders of neighboring countries further exacerbated this scenario and *de facto* nullified the principle of free movement within the 26-country Schengen Area. The image of "Fortress Europe" precisely points at European immigration governance as heavily restrictive and security oriented.

Consequently, humanitarian emergencies mushroomed in many European localities, which were forced to deal with the sudden, sometimes massive arrival of migrants. From October 2013 to July 2017, the municipality of Milan assisted approximately 125,500 asylum seekers. In the case of Barcelona, the number of arrivals was lower (i.e., 7,433 asylum seekers were assisted in 2018), but it increased dramatically each year (i.e., 424 in 2013). In addition, both cities had to address the deficiencies of national asylum policies, largely insufficient in their means and driven by emergency logics. In short, major global transformations and flaws in multilevel governance have "flowed downstream." Global migration, restrictive immigration management, lack of interstate cooperation, and poor national asylum governance are all factors that lie outside the competency of local authorities but became critical questions for policy makers at the city level,

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who have been forced to "pay the bill." The following discussion explores how city governments can respond to such unfavorable conditions.

BUILDING URBAN POWER

As a result of the peculiar qualities of urban politics, city governments can convert the conditions constraining their prerogatives into opportunities for policy change. In fact, cities are political hubs that cluster large constituencies of voters, powerful economic elites, communities of experts and intellectuals, and grassroots activists. All of these often are tied to transnational networks. Local political leaders—mayors especially—can tap into such dense webs of relationships to pursue their policy objectives (Sapotichne and Smith 2012). Drawing on their visibility and credibility as political figures, they can shape the public agenda nationwide and beyond, enacting strategies of issue definition, conflict expansion, and venue shopping (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). These possibilities also indicate that urban governance is not only a matter of formal competencies. City governments—although legally subordinated—also have a strategic toolbox at their disposal for shaping policies in line with their vision and interest. Thus, policy makers at various territorial tiers engage in complex relations based on cooperation, antagonism, and mutual dependency (Le Galès and Harding 1998).

Immigration is a case in point when examining these multilevel dynamics. Although constrained in many respects, city governments enact policies that crucially affect the lives of migrants (de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016). Room to maneuver is large because abstract, sometimes ambiguous legislative prescriptions are translated into concrete administrative practices by urban policy makers (Mayer 2018, 235). Urgent problems force them to act fast, and innovations may arise during these acceleration phases. This is why cities are often "avant-gardes" whose experiments may travel to other localities or levels of government (Caponio 2018). Far from being "policy takers" at the bottom of a multilevel hierarchy, urban actors can set their own local agenda, identifying "'local' problems in need of clear 'local' solutions" (Scholten 2013, 220). Because priorities may differ across levels of government, policy making may become "decoupled"—that is, governmental players are poorly coordinated and possibly in conflict with one another. Specialists on European immigration point to the divergence between national policies—generally restrictive and security oriented—and local practices of inclusion. Not only partisanship but also pragmatic rationales (e.g., maintenance of public order and cohesion of communities) drive the preference for progressive policies (Mayer 2018).

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How have progressive south European city governments responded to the constraints posed by the "refugee crisis"? Milan's government has engaged in extensive negotiations with the Italian executive to expand its own administrative capacities. To bring national counterparts to the bargaining table, local political leaders have persistently sought to attract public attention to the issues at stake. For instance, Milan's mayor Beppe Sala made national headlines on September 19, 2016, in a letter sent to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* in which he emphasized how "Milan is doing everything in its means" to cope with the crisis. At the same time, he called on the central government to "ease the huge weight on the shoulders of cities" (Sala 2016). The Ministry of Interior accommodated many requests from the local administration: for example, allocating exceptional resources, extending local infrastructures for migrant integration, and granting greater autonomy in managing reception centers.

Interactions with central authorities have been more limited in the case of Barcelona. The city government launched a plan named "Barcelona Refuge City," which aims at boosting local services and resettling asylum seekers across Europe *regardless* of the central state. The city government could bypass the Spanish executive's unreceptiveness by establishing an international network of cities and NGOs as an alternative policy venue. Mayor Ada Colau exploited her charismatic leadership for promoting the interests of local governments and the rights of migrants beyond the boundaries of Spanish politics. For instance, on June 9–11, 2017, Barcelona hosted the First International Municipalist Summit of Fearless Cities, a global network of progressive municipalities. The policy roundtable on immigration was introduced by the following statement: "While States build walls and fences, cities and towns are welcoming refugees and providing spaces of sanctuary to undocumented residents" (Fearless Cities 2017).

Both local governments have partly circumvented the constraints imposed by multilevel governance and shaped the public agenda well beyond their local realm. Capitalizing on the peculiar qualities of urban politics—namely, the availability of dense relational networks extended over an array of geographical scales—they responded to the unfavorable conditions that had "flowed downstream" by "moving upstream." However, the bargaining power of South European mayors is more limited compared to their US counterparts, who have greater leverage to locally subvert federal provisions. But similar to the case of North American sanctuary cities, the municipalities of Milan and Barcelona could rely on the cooperation of a broad activist base to deploy their strategies.

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The following discussion focuses on the role of social movements in urban policy making.

POLICY MAKING FROM BELOW

Social movements have gained importance in many fields of urban governance, especially since the withdrawal of the state from the sphere of social reproduction (Mayer 2003). What is their role in (migration) policy making? Being located at the periphery of power relations, protestors usually have limited opportunities for changing policies. Yet, the urban environment may facilitate the success of marginalized groups. As a result of the relational density of cities, immigrant activists can weave networks of solidarity that enhance the viability of their claims (Nicholls 2016). Classic studies on protests in US cities similarly emphasize the role of local sympathetic elites that work as "transmission belts" between demand makers and power holders (e.g., Lipsky 1970). Networking endeavors even allow activist groups to scale up and out—that is, to strategically extend beyond their location of origin and access other geographical arenas. Hence, the city works for social movements "as a *relational incubator*, facilitating complex relational exchanges that generate a diversity of useful resources for campaigns operating at a variety of spatial scales" (Nicholls 2008, 842; italics in original).

Although activists usually engage in contentious relationships with authorities, collaboration might be mutually beneficial under certain circumstances. In fact, governance is a process of coordination among state and non-state actors in fragmented and uncertain environments—a feature especially pronounced in urban settings (Borraz and Le Galès 2010). Much of the power that urban policy makers can gain is contingent on such coordination capacity—that is, their ability to craft large and cohesive coalitions around a certain political vision (Liu et al. 2010). Indeed, studies on local migration policy making highlight the prominence of social movements in such processes of consensus building (Steil and Vasi 2014). Activists often have a knowledge of social problems "on the ground" and a sterling reputation among their reference constituencies (Mayer 2018). Also, they are able to ignite public controversy, framing issues to align with their own demands. Sympathetic political leaders who seek to implement pro-migrant local policies are in great need of such cognitive and political resources.

In the case of Milan, the collaboration between public officials and activists has been controversial. Radical activists accused the city government of being too moderate and opportunistic in exploiting their participation for the sake of electoral rewards. Yet, they also profited from the responsive attitude of incumbents to legitimize their claims within otherwise unreceptive policy venues. For example, *Zona 8 Solidale*—a pro-migrant neighborhood committee—obtained various concessions from Milan's *prefettura* (i.e., the local branch of the Ministry of Interior), including permission to access reception centers and provide welfare services "from below" through volunteering. This was achieved as a result of the brokerage of local public officials, paving the way for the emergence of a national solidarity movement. In a self-reinforcing mechanism, grassroots participation allowed the city government to construct an image of Milan as a "city of welcome," thereby strengthening its position in supralocal arenas.

Dynamics have been more cooperative in Barcelona. In part, this is due to the fact that the local administration emanated from an activist milieu. Mayor Ada Colau herself has been a leading spokesperson for the Spanish housing-rights movement (Flesher Fominaya 2015). Activists have participated in the formulation of the Barcelona Refuge City plan and engaged in various transnational actions for establishing safe passage to Catalunya (i.e., the region in which Barcelona is located). The city government has intervened as a facilitator by providing financial support and assuring foreign authorities of the reliability of activist organizations. Also, in turn, urban policy makers could sustain their political strategy as a result of the mobilization of social movements in the city. For example, the pro-migrant organization *Casa Nostra Casa Vostra* (Our Home Is Your Home) has organized several events to drive policy change at the local, national, and European levels. The largest event in Barcelona was on February 18, 2017, when roughly half a million people marched in solidarity with migrants. Local incumbents joined these demonstrations, dramatically boosting their resonance nationwide and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Understanding cities is essential for understanding society and politics at large. Most of the global population currently is settled in urban spaces, but their influence transcends even these territorial boundaries—reaching and weaving together people, areas, and activities worldwide. This article describes key distinctive features of urban policy making, arguing that its underlying mechanisms, in many respects, are unique when compared to governance processes unfolding in different contexts.

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Urban policy making is peculiar, first of all, for the collective problems it addresses. Although rural communities also face dramatic global-scale transformations, these changes

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tend to concentrate in cities because of the large numbers of diverse individuals living in restricted, often overcrowded spaces. Urban policy making is further complicated by multilevel politics. The prerogatives of municipalities are generally narrower than—and subordinated to—those of national institutions. But because of their propinquity to societal change, local policy makers are those "forced" to respond, with or without the support of the central state. However, whereas these are political constraints faced by any local authority, those operating in cities tend to have a superior "firepower" to stretch them, insofar as cities are strategic sites for political agency. This holds for both municipalities and social movements, which can exploit the relational density of cities to shape the public agenda and access policy arenas at various spatial scales, far beyond their immediate local realms. In summary, urban policy making cannot be simply subsumed under the heading of policy making with a local scope. It seems, on the contrary, hardly "local." ■

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