

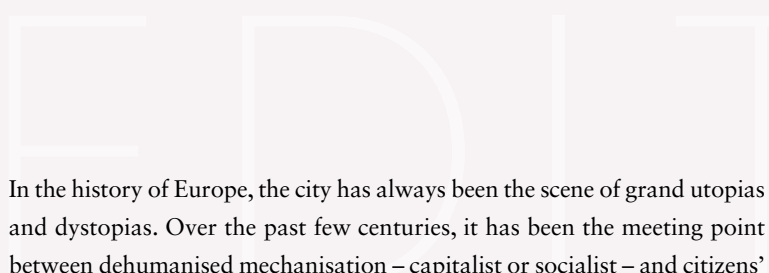
EDITORIAL

THE CALL OF THE CITY

LAURENT STANDAERT FOR THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The political and societal importance of cities today speaks for itself. The 100 richest cities in the world produce almost half of the world's GDP, and by 2050 three quarters of the global population will be living in urban areas. Whether 'smart', 'resilient' or 'connected' – if we are to believe think tanks and other foresight studies – it is in cities where the future of humanity will be shaped. As social and democratic laboratories, economic incubators, testing grounds of participation and local politics, it is to cities that people all over the world turn, to demand greater control and power over their own political destiny.

From fossil fuel divestment pioneers such as Berlin, driven by its citizen movements, to innovative partnerships on issues of transport or energy, many cities in Europe are spearheading the fight against climate change, shaping policies for the future. Other cities, far more than the Member States in Europe and beyond, constitute the vanguard of new forms of solidarity, and are organising to welcome refugees. But for all the 'best' of cities, there is also the 'worst': financialisation, extreme inequality, consumerism, disruptive gentrification, rent-seeking and platform economic schemes, rural exodus, and so on. The development of the city, which has often come at the expense of our relationship with nature, is also a reflection of our own modernity.



In the history of Europe, the city has always been the scene of grand utopias and dystopias. Over the past few centuries, it has been the meeting point between dehumanised mechanisation – capitalist or socialist – and citizens' aspirations towards freedom and new kinds of solidarity, beyond traditional forms. Urban dynamics such as 'Reclaim the Streets' or 'Right to the City' at the end of the 20th century, or more recent movements of 'outraged' citizens occupying the streets and squares in Madrid, Paris, or elsewhere, also have at their core a vision of deep and structural transformation. Confronted with the modern city, where political, economic, cultural, and social capital is concentrated, residents and citizen movements demand a redistribution of power. The city is thus no longer simply the scene of social struggles, but is itself at stake, having become the very foundation of our socio-economic models.

From Barcelona to Amsterdam, from the interview which opens this issue to the one which concludes it, the city is designated as both the 'new political centre' and the 'battleground' of our times. From Paris's ban on diesel vehicles to public transport in Prague or San Francisco, from green practices in Vienna and Ghent to the wave of 're-municipalisation' across Europe, this edition explores both the city and city policies that will – and already are – forging the future of our societies. Other authors analyse the failure of the politics of 'trickle-down' from mega-cities to small towns and rural areas in Poland, or the gulf between rural and urban life in Finland. Brussels, London, and Bilbao offer more perspectives on current urban planning processes and the commodification of public spaces and housing, as well as de-industrialisation and competition between towns. Finally, Saskia Sassen analyses the city in the era of globalisation, and two young researchers from Portugal and France consider the prospects for a 'Europe of cities', and possible future scenarios for our cities through the prism of the climate, respectively.

In the 1970s, André Gorz – one of the greatest thinkers in political ecology, whom we lost 10 years ago now – emphasised the importance of transforming the city as a springboard for transforming society. His writings, and those of other thinkers, helped to spark the budding awareness amongst the educated urban upper classes of fundamental issues around

the social environment and quality of life. Founded during the following decade, the first Green Parties emerged from this awakening, and would retain the electoral character of their urban origins. But even if the presence of Greens and their impact on city politics are clear for all to see, they cannot and should not shy away from casting a critical eye towards the city as a political entity – at the risk of seeing other forces move in on that ground, and of allowing the gulf separating cities from small towns and the countryside to widen. For if the voting patterns seen in the latest elections across Europe and beyond illustrate starkly that the progressive and liberal vote is greater in cities than elsewhere, the many electoral defeats suggest that any political hegemony cities may have is relative. These developments highlight the role of the city as a laboratory for change, and also the necessity of reconnecting with the Europe that lives beyond the city limits.

The progressive struggles for the city will be as much about a more just, ecological, joyful, and sustainable society, as about supporting the ‘multi-city’ of urban patterns at a European level. Our fate depends on the outcomes of these struggles, as much for the Greens as a political force as for tackling social and environmental challenges, and ensuring democratic control by citizens. It is thus essential for Greens to drive the reflection on the role of cities in Europe. It is not a matter of promoting a pro-city bias – with all the economic and environmental alienation that urbanisation can bring – but to go beyond the fixation on city politics to the detriment of the political city, and to think of the city as a living space for its residents. It is in cities – in all cities – that the wheels of change are set in motion. Our thinking about the city, and our capacity to imagine the city and its place in our world, will determine the extent to which we can influence, participate in, and steer the course of this change.

This edition is dedicated to Erica Meijers, one of the founders of the Green European Journal and a member of its editorial board, and to Beatrice White, its deputy editor-in-chief, both of whom are moving on in 2017. The Journal thanks them for their endless support and wishes them all the best in their new life adventures.