VIEWPOINT: Polarizations, Exclusionary Neonationalisms and the City

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Political geographers have recently renewed conversation on the spatialities of exclusionary neonationalism, surfacing in the form of right-wing political populism (Casaglia et al, 2020), Islamophobia (Koch and Vora, 2020) and neo-colonial relations (Avni, 2020). These insightful commentaries, however, are yet to address an important political-geographic dimension of the phenomenon: the growing schism between metropolitan and nationalist politics, which we conceptualize here as *double polarization.* The spatial and political consequences of this emergent dynamic, we contend, call for new articulations of urban political geography.

A recent statement by the Tel-Aviv Mayor, referring to his city's efforts to subvert the Israeli government's planned deportation of African asylum seekers, opens a window to this urban political geography:

> "Yes, we provide a school for the African children the government is trying to deport. And of course, the Prime Minister is using this to incite against us. Instead of treating the problem caused by his government's failed policies… under these circumstances, we operate according to our own humane principles." (Ron Huldai, Tel-Aviv Mayor, 31.8.2016)

Such tensions between cosmopolitan and exclusionary political impulses, of course, are not unique to Tel-Aviv. Quite the opposite, they are evident in dozens of similar cases in the global North, West, South and East, involving struggles over migration, identity, distribution, security and democracy. These, we suggest, are

1

structural tensions, signaling the coming of a new phase in the relations between metropolitan agglomerations and nation-states, with profound implications for political, social and group relations.

Our analysis points to the contours of a new urban political geography taking shape around two interrelated axes of polarization: First, a 'horizontal' axis engaging metropolitan and non-metropolitan nationalist forces; and second, a 'vertical' axis comprising stratified ethnic, racial and social groups *within* the metropolis.   These two polarizations highlight 'main currents' in a more complex, multi-faceted political geographies and economies. They feed on one another to create new assemblages of urban geopolitics (see Rokem et al 2017). On the one hand, metropolitan liberal cosmopolitanism has become a call-to-arms for anti-liberal neonationalist movements. On the other hand, metropolitan elites have failed to stop neonationalist policies from deepening ethnic and class disparities and colonialities within cities. These disparities, let us remember, were spawned by economic globalization, deregulation and privatization, which metropolitan elites have themselves supported for decades.

These dynamics, we suggest, herald a new state of instability superseding the relatively stable post-war, state-based, liberal world order (Taylor, 1994; Babic, 2020). This order is no longer able to contain the forces of massive globalization, migration, and demands for equality and recognition. These forces fuel mobilizations and conflicts, typically surfacing in major urban centers that often challenge state sovereignty and idealized images of 'the nation'. Such conflicts have erupted recently in Barcelona, Los Angeles, Paris, Warsaw, Budapest, Cairo, Athens, Nairobi, Istanbul, Beirut, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Sao Paolo, and Santiago, to mention but a few.

In the current political landscape, older hegemonic notions of 'the nation' are being destabilized partly by the influx of migrants and refugees into rapidly growing metropolitan agglomerations. The traditional statist responses to the presence of migrants and minorities, namely assimilation and/or domination, have become

sources of polarizing conflicts as metropolitan hubs endorse liberalism and greater
tolerance. These dynamics have laid the groundwork for the rise of neonationalism
– a conservative, often reactionary mobilization in the name of 'protecting the
nation'.

Neonationalism naturally draws on traditional nationalism but also displays
its own unique combination of characteristics, such as opposition to migration,
Islamophobia, anti-elitism and anti-institutionalism, a commitment to 'free-market'
capitalism, and suspicion towards welfarism. These are coupled with increasing
authoritarianism, affinity with religion, and a return of militarism and patriarchy (see
also – Lopez de Souza, 2020, Casaglia et al, 2020, Koch and Vora, 2020). The recent
Covid-19 pandemic has bolstered the popular support of neonationalist agendas,
particularly the introduction of anti-democratic emergency measures and
restrictions on migration (see Simpson, 2020). Examples abound: in Trump's USA,
everything from sanctuary cities to the wearing of anti-Covid masks has become
wrapped up in the struggle between neonationalism and the liberal policy approach
favored by metropolitan leaders; and in Erdogan's Turkey and Modi's India, state
administrations and nationalist parties have waged fierce campaigns against the rise
of liberal forces in Istanbul and Delhi, respectively.

Neonationalist agendas typically maintain a thin veneer of democracy
although they tend to crown 'strong leaders' who often bend the rules in order to
stay in power in the name of 'protecting national interests'. Unlike 'old'
ethnonationalism or openly racist regimes, neonationalists rhetorically support
inclusion of relatively 'new' groups into the nation. For example, southern
Europeans, Irish, Jews and even some Latinos --   marginalized in the past -- are now
considered an integral part of the Rightist neonationalist campaign in the USA, which
attempts to marginalize other racially and culturally distant groups, such as
Mexicans, Blacks and Muslims. In India, despite the persistence of a caste system,
Dalits and other 'lower casts' are warmly embraced by Hindutva nationalism,
articulated and aggressively promoted by the BJP (Indian Peoples Party) in recent

decades. Indian Muslims, on the other hand, are systematically marginalized.

The rise of neonationalism has charted a course for society in direct opposition to the cosmopolitan, liberal and development agendas pursued by urban elites. Key for our discussion is the *deliberate* political tension neonationalists have created with metropolitan elites, cultures, and programs. This has widened political divisions globally, with metropolitan urban cultures attempting to promote further migration, relatively open borders, sanctuary for refugees, tolerance and democracy – all strongly opposed by neonationalist movements represented by leaders such as Erdogan, Modi and Trump, as well as by Hungary's Viktor Orban, Britain's Teresa May and Boris Johnson, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. In almost all cases, neonationalist politics draw on support from non-metropolitan regions (including many small and medium-sized cities) where suspicions of the cosmopolitan projects of metropolitan society run high. Hence, horizontal polarization is conceptualized along a 'metropolitan – non-metropolitan' spectrum in which the latter is, of course, also partially urbanized, complicating the traditional urban-rural dichotomy.

A further complication is the impact of horizontal tensions on stratification *within* the metropolis—what we call 'vertical polarization'. These tensions reflect the deepening of inequalities associated with the current stage of global capitalism, framed by financialization, accelerating digitization, and widespread gentrification (Sassen, 2016). Mobile, speculative capital has transformed the neoliberal city through the privatization of public assets, resources and spaces, and, more recently, through the marketization of personal data. As widely documented, these steps have encroached on the right to the city for most residents by increasing socioeconomic inequalities, hollowing out the middle classes, and transferring unprecedented resources to small, mobile, globalizing elites (Harvey, 2019; Sassen, 2016).

The rise of neonationalism, with its emphasis on the supremacy of 'native' groups and rejection of migrants and other minorities, has exacerbated urban

conflicts created by contemporary capitalism through oppressive urban practices
such as 'bordering' (Yuval-Davis et al, 2019), 'gray spacing' (Yiftachel, 2015),
displacement (Yiftachel, 2020); 'economic cleansing' (Sassen, 2016) and 'racial
banishment' (Roy, 2019). Tensions created by political disenfranchisement, chronic
insecurity (Simone, 2020), and aggressive policing and deportation--overwhelmingly
affecting migrants, minorities, and people of colour—have escalated. This has
occurred against a backdrop of spiraling land and housing prices and growing
competition for urban services as numbers of (internal and external) migrants and
refugees have increased.

The pressures created by housing shortages, police harassment, and inadequate
services have, in turn, encouraged the mobilization of urban social movements,
many of which raise identity 'flags', such as LGTB, Blacks, Latinos, Dalits, favela-
dwellers, Kurds, Palestinians, Greens, and youth. While some movements have
worked in solidarity with others, overall, the combination of class, identity and
generational conflicts has propelled internal fragmentation within urban
populations, altering urban citizenship and group relations (see Lebuhn, 2019).
Consequently, the emerging metropolitan polities now incorporate a complex and
changing assemblage of groups, resources, rights and deprivations, governed by
conditions of 'separate and unequal', with large parts of the population, often the
majority, remaining unrecognized, disenfranchised, or marginalized. These
conditions and conflicts are not new, but they have intensified dramatically as states
attempt to impose their neonationalist agendas on metropolises (Rokem and Boano,
2018).

These settings give rise to conditions of spatially *inverted coloniality*. While in
the past, colonial rule saw the seizure of territories and subjection of their people,
this new type of coloniality bears witness to a (coerced) flocking of marginalized
people to rapidly expanding metropolitan regions, where many remain
impoverished, displaceable and segregated during the remaking of 'racial capitalism'

(Roy, 2019). They are the subjects of the new type of urban coloniality, governed by practices of domination more subtle than in previous colonial eras, yet equally stratifying and framed by near impregnable identity and economic regimes. Stark examples of such urban regimes abound – from the *hokou* residency system in Chinese cities that classifies large segments of the population as 'floating', to the majority population of non-citizens residing in the city-states of the United Arab Emirates, to the disenfranchised Palestinians in Jerusalem, who constitute about half the metropolis.

What does double polarization mean for scholarly research? At this preliminary stage we may note that the process itself, and the conflicts and instabilities it creates, appear to challenge most dominant urban and nationalism theories, and hence demand rethinking and new theorizations. In urban studies, most research has framed urbanization predominantly as a surface expression of global capitalism, while belittling other structural forces, as previously noted by feminist and indigenous scholars.   This has brought leading theorists to define the 'urban question' narrowly and to conclude that the total domination by neoliberalism creates a post-political, planetary urban order, in which there is no other way to imagine society beyond the current stage of capitalism (Bauman, 2013).

Yet, the understanding of urbanization as shaped by parallel polarization processes can complicate simple dichotomies or binaries, highlighting major cities as centers of furious present- (not post-) political conflicts and mobilizations in which several versions of justice, equality, rights, and the 'common good' are imagined and struggled over.

Double polarization also challenges dominant theories of nationalism, which have focused on the institutional power of nation-states to shape identity and citizenship according to their hegemonic cultures, in a process of integrative 'banalization' (Koch and Paasi, 2016).   Actually-existing forms of neonationalism, we suggest here, appear to create far more contentious political geographies, spawning

6

new confrontations between liberal elites, neonationalist state actors, dominant social groups, and minorities. This polarizing fragmentation creates urban regimes that generate new separate-and-unequal colonialities and new instabilities, all of which openly challenge the unifying potential of territorial nation-building.

To conclude, the emerging urban political geography is clearly illustrated in a recent tweet by London's Mayor, who speaks of London as an open city, in opposition to the neonationalist British government's intentions to impose post-Brexit restrictions on migrants:

> As Brexit draws closer, it's important to remind friends and family that, regardless of whether they've just arrived or they've lived here all their lives, they are Londoners. They'll always be welcome here. #LondonIsOpen (@Sadiq Khan, Twitter, 5.1.20)

Clearly, our arguments here only form a starting point for a research journey. They require debate, dispute, substantiation and monitoring, as has already begun in this virtual forum. Given the rise of the new urban political geography and its immense impact on society, such research is needed more than ever.

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