Urban Social Movements in Rio de Janeiro
The ‘Missing’ Environmental Question

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Abstract  Rio de Janeiro is suffering from increasing environmental damage. Urban social movements in the city, however, seem not to be considering this issue at the same level as other issues. The absence of a manifest environmental consciousness by urban social movements in Rio de Janeiro is striking, particularly from a social ecology point of view. It would seem crucial for them to consider and take action to protect the environment, not only because of the local negative environmental issues, but also for the broad climate change effects connected with them. It seems that urban social movements in Rio de Janeiro follow a pattern in which only when a basic standard of living is ensured and minimal working rights are guaranteed, can they start claiming other rights and concentrate on environmental problems. This work suggests that the holistic approach of social ecology can help urban social movements to have a more understanding of the social and ecological impacts of various projects and solve the dichotomy Brown vs Green agenda.


1 Introduction

At the beginning of June 2013, in many cities in Brazil, a series of mobilisation against a general increase of the price of public transport fares started to take place. These mobilization, developing and incorporating other demands, in few weeks time reached an incredible magnitude of “popular mass revolt” (Gohn 2014, 8). Rio de Janeiro was undoubtedly at the forefront of all the mobilisations since June-July 2013, for number of people mobilized and intensity (Cava 2013; Cava, Cocco 2014; Venturini 2016). The 2014 FIFA World Cup can be seen as the end of this cycle of intense mobilisations that started in June 2013.

This work is based on a 12 month research that I conducted in the city of Rio de Janeiro between March 2013 and August 2016. I believe that research can be an invaluable tool for the advancement of social and political
struggles (Harvey 2001; Pickerill, Chatterton 2006). For this reason my research has been informed by a militant research approach (Shukaitis, Graeber 2007), putting emphasis on learning about, with and from people in contraposition to researching on urban social movements (Venturini 2016). Participating in the daily life of local urban social movements in Rio de Janeiro I was able to observe and highlight their position on the urban ecological crises in the city, guiding my analysis. In this work, I refer to urban social movements in Rio de Janeiro, focussing to all that organised groups that were acting during the 2013-2016 mobilisations.

My analytical framework is based on social ecology, a theory developed by Murray Bookchin with the aim to assess and solve the current social and environmental crises, conceived as direct consequences of capitalism and all forms of domination. Social ecology is a powerful analytical tool of current crises and a theory of action that offers strategies, ethics and a reconstructive vision for a future society.¹

Examining the complex understanding of urban crises by urban social movements, and their tactics and organisational strategies, I trace points of contact between urban social movement in Rio de Janeiro and the social ecology perspectives. This work bridges these two, highlighting how urban social movements’ practices and visions, and the social ecology theory can benefit from each other, in order to build relevant and decolonised knowledge for social change.

This article is structured as follow: first I introduce the core of social ecology, second I highlight the ecological crises in Rio de Janeiro, third I consider what I called the ‘missing’ environmental question and the possible contributions of social ecology, and then I end with some conclusions.

¹ For an introduction to social ecology see (White 2008, Price 2012, Venturini forthcoming).
2 Introducing the Motor of Social Ecology: between Ecology, Freedom and Domination

Social ecology is based on challenging social hierarchy and social domination, with a theoretical elaboration that attempts to go beyond the Marxist idea of social class and State and at the same time imposes an ecological viewpoint. This elaboration is based on the idea that “the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (Bookchin 2005, 65). Crucially, for social ecology, “nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems” (Bookchin 1993, no page).

Social ecology argues that environment and society are inextricably linked to each other. Nowadays both labour and nature are considered and treated as commodities (O’Connor 1997) and the pressing planetary environmental problems (Klein 2014, Turner 2014, Global Footprint Network 2015, Steffen et al. 2015) can be addressed only by facing the social problems within society. As stated in a recent interpretation and re-assessment of Bookchin’s work by Price (2012), all of social ecology is thus grounded in the fundamental ontological understanding that hierarchy and domination “were in place before the emergence of the surplus. Thus, in the Bookchin programme, they are not the inevitable by-product of the move to an economic world; they are not, perhaps most importantly, the by-product of a human project to dominate a stingy, harsh natural world” (157), but are born further back in human history with the emergence of gerontocracy. This understanding is the central motor of social ecology (Price 2012) on which the entire social ecology theory and its arguments are grounded.

This idea deviates from the classical Marxist tradition and uses concepts that help us move beyond an analysis based on solely economic relationships towards building a greater understanding of dominations. Indeed also Barca (2014) stressed that “working-class communities are far from being unified social entities entirely corresponding to theoretical definitions of their class identity, interests, and behavior” (14). Similarly “working-class environmental consciousness [does not] entirely coincide with the politics of Labor parties or unions” (Barca 2014, 14). For this reason Bookchin (1986a; 2005) stresses the importance of concentrating on domination and hierarchy, and away from a focus on class and exploitation, hoping to build a new political movement.

The organic world is defined “as an evolutionary process” (Bookchin 1995a, 17) in which two different kinds of nature to which human beings belong coexist: ‘first nature’ and ‘second nature’, where the former is related to organic or biological evolution and the latter to a unique human social evolution (Bookchin 1995a, 2005). As well-summarized by White (2008), in social ecology, humans are “nature rendered self-conscious”
Second nature developed from first nature, not in opposition to it. Many western thinkers offered a dichotomy between non-human nature and human society (Pepper 2003), whilst for social ecology humankind plays a multifaceted role within nature, being a unique expression of it, still part of it, but often acting in an antagonistic way toward it.

In this way social ecology critiques both the tendencies of anthropocentrism (where humanity is considered superior to nature) and deep ecology (where humans have to return to nature). Social ecology proposes a different approach, understanding the uniqueness of human progress in parallel with natural evolution and proposing, at the same time, an organic point of view in analysing the problem (Bookchin 1996a, Staudenmaier 2005).

Social ecology is focused on rationally analysing humans’ ‘second nature’ and understanding, within it, the origins of social hierarchy and domination. This analysis starts with early human communities; what Bookchin calls ‘organic societies’, “spontaneously formed, non-coercive and egalitarian” (White 2008, 36). In these societies, woman and man had two different realms, with different functions and culture, the “sororal society of women” and the “fraternal society of men” (Bookchin 1986a, 18). Other important features of organic societies were the absence of the idea of human destiny to rule nature, the common usufruct of land, the presence of an irreducible minimum for everyone (e.g. food, shelter, etc.), the equality of unequal, the commitment to freedom, and cooperation. In these societies humanity is thus viewed as part of nature, the concept of domination is not yet developed and women and men lived in balance. In Bookchin’s interpretation, the first form of domination emerged from organic societies: that of the elders over the young. Following this analysis, “the notion that all ecological problems are social problems, [...] stem[s] in the first instance from the emergence of hierarchy in its nascent form in the gerontocracy” (Price 2012, 157). On this point Bookchin is very clear and he also stresses that the concept of domination of nature is a human construct that does not exist in the first nature: “what we talk about when we speak of ‘the domination of nature’ is an ideology, not a fact. ‘Nature’ can no more be ‘dominated’ than an electron or an atom” (Bookchin 1995d, no page). Moreover, according to this interpretation, social evolution is an effect of “changes in social forms and relationships and not because of the natural reaction to a harsh and necessitarian natural world; [thus] hierarchy as such is perhaps not the inevitable by-product of humanity’s historical move through civilisation” (Price 2012, 157). White (2008) underlines possible incoherences of Bookchin’s anthropological accounts of organic societies; having acknowledged this problem, it is however important to consider, following the analysis by Graeber (2004), the value of social theories based on ethnographic or anthropological work aimed at outlining and describing alternative possibilities. In this regard, Price (2012), in his reassessing of Bookchin’s work, whilst acknowledging the
necessity of clarifications, underlines the “coherence and unity” (195) of his social history.

Overcoming domination in social forms and relations is thus fundamental for building a new society based on freedom. From a political point of view, by criticizing all forms of dominations, social ecology speaks “with all emancipatory movements” (Morris 2012, 257) with an unifying framework for a general call for action. This call emphasises that changing our social structures can also dialectically change our relationship with nature. With this dialectical process, Bookchin goes beyond the classical Marxist concept that emphasises the contrast between nature and human or indeed between the rural and the urban. In his analysis, this contrast has shaped the development of our society through history, enhancing unbalances and exploitation. Morris (2012) adds that “Marx [...] was preoccupied with the preconditions of freedom (technological development, material abundance) not with the conditions of freedom (decentralization, the formation of communities, direct democracy, and technologies and urban life on a human scale)” (245) and the social ecology project exactly aims to analyse and propose the conditions of freedom. In order to make a substantial change, for a real ecological society, a process of profound reconciliation between nature and human is necessary, pointing at the birth of a new non-hierarchical society based on concepts of freedom and cooperation, going beyond first and second nature (Bookchin 1996a). Only within a unity between nature and humans can there be a complete development of all the human possibilities and potentialities.

3 The Ecological Crisis in Rio de Janeiro

The environmental problems in Rio de Janeiro are many and complex: recent policies are in striking contrast to the hope born from the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, hosted in Rio de Janeiro in 2012.

First of all, population growth in Rio de Janeiro exploded in the second half of the last century and, despite the fact that the growth has now decelerated (Cox 2013), the city is constantly sprawling (Herzog 2013a; Herzog, Finotti 2013), creating important impacts on the environment. It is a clear example of a city development without control, which threatens all of us, following a model of urbanization that Bookchin clearly warned about (1986b, 1995b). While sprawling, as Souza (1999) points out, Rio de Janeiro is developing the classical socio-environmental problems of a metropolis in the semi-periphery, on one side due to deregulated and fast industrialization typical of core countries, on the other linked to poor settlements, typical of peripheral countries. If during the colonial period Rio de Janeiro was one of the biggest slave hub in the world (Guimarães
2014), the art exhibition *From Valongo to Favela: The Imaginary and the Periphery* reminds us of the link between the slavery period and the current situation of favelas' inhabitants (Cardoso, Diniz 2014). Looking at today favelas’ inhabitant, regarded only as cheap and unskilled manpower, in poor living conditions and stigmatized by the society, makes wonder if slavery ever ended.

On one side, living conditions in favelas are very precarious and, often, people living there are the cause of environmental problems (Souza 2003), like pollution from sewage and garbage.

On the other side, it is important to focus on other and deep problems, connected to the kind of development that Rio de Janeiro is embracing, based on the (re)expansion of the secondary sector, with industries and extractive companies located in the close proximity of the city, in the State of Rio de Janeiro, like the heavy polluted Guanabara Bay (Melo et al. 2006). On the seashore, in particular, three industrial centres (all developed in the last ten years and partially completed or near completion) are at the stage of environmental discussion for their heavy impact on the environment: Complexo Industrial-Portuário do Açu (Industrial and Port Complex of Açu), Complexo Petroquímico do Rio de Janeiro (Petrochemical Complex of Rio de Janeiro, COMPERJ), ThyssenKrupp CSA (Comissão de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos e Cidadania da Alerj 2013). The first project, the Complexo Industrial-Portuário do Açu, situated in the north-east of the State of Rio de Janeiro, around 300 km from the city, is not only a super port for goods and minerals but also hosts different industrial infrastructures, like thermal power plants, steel industries, oil treatments, shipyards and cement factories (Prumo 2010). The second, the COMPERJ is a petrochemical complex and is situated less than 50 km north-east from Rio de Janeiro. The third, the ThyssenKrupp CSA is an important steel complex, whose construction was started in 2006 and finalised in 2010. It is situated in the Sepetiba Bay, in the western part of Rio de Janeiro.

There is vast literature stressing the impacts of each of these industrial complexes, revealing the strong damages they cause to the environment and on local populations, due to uncontrolled urban development in their surroundings and the disruption of traditional local economy, based on farming and fishing. Moreover, these are only the last three big examples

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2 *Favela* is a Brazilian Portuguese word for ‘slum’.

3 The problem is complex: the housing situation in the favelas cannot be reduced to blame individual behaviours but has to be seen as a social production of poverty.

4 In 2017 the entire complex was sold to the Argentinian company *Ternium SA*.

of a list of industrial complexes that have been developed in the area in the last decades, all with similar impacts and problems. Unfortunately, despite the (partially) good intentions of the Rio+20 conference, little has changed in Rio de Janeiro in relation to the environment, creating the necessity for urban social movements to fight.

4 The ‘Missing’ Environmental Question

As just introduced, Rio de Janeiro is suffering from increasing environmental damage and problems. Urban social movements, however, seem not to be considering this issue at the same level as the other social issues.

During the period of my fieldwork, very few social movements mobilized around specific environmental issues in Rio de Janeiro. Only in the case of the industrial complex ThyssenKrupp CSA, the campaign Pare a TKCSA! (Stop TKCSA) built a broad coalition and gained attention (Instituto Políticas Alternativas para o Cone Sul 2012). As a result of the campaign, various legal proceedings are open and threaten the closure of part of the complex (Lorenzi 2013). This success was ensured by the manifest magnitude of the law violations and pollution and the support from local researchers who produced scientific dossiers to help the campaign.

In a country that has seen incredible industrial development over the last few decades and is also facing increasing deforestation, only few major campaigns, such as the campaigns against the use of pesticides, deforestation and the construction of the Belo Monte Dams (Oliveira, Cohn 2014), have reached a national/international audience. It is striking that a significant campaign against the use of nuclear power has never existed, even though Brazil is currently building its third reactor at the Angra nuclear power plant.

An exemplary episode was the announced public sale of the Libra oil field, discovered in 2010, situated at sea, 230 km from the Rio de Janeiro coast and considered one of the biggest recently discovered oil fields. A campaign developed with the slogans “O petróleo é nosso!” (The oil is ours!) and “Não ao leilão de Libra!” (No to the privatization of Libra!) and it was boosted by the June-July 2013 mobilisations. Due to popular pres-


6 For a complete list of the undergoing projects see Sistema FIRJAN 2012; for a map of the main pollutant complex see Rio+Tóxico 2012.

7 An interesting exception is the recent campaign Ocupa Golfe, a small occupation for the defence of the Atlantic Forest, against the construction of a golf resort for the 2016 Olympic Games (Guimarães 2016).
sure, in 2013 president Dilma modified the selling condition, increasing the revenue for the State to be dedicated to education and health. However, different kinds of social movements, organizations and unions viewed this modification as insufficient and started a campaign, which peaked on the 21 October 2013, the date of the public sale. The event was organized in Rio de Janeiro, the army was mobilized and violent clashes erupted with the demonstrators. Throughout the campaign the main concern was economic, not environmental. In core countries an event of this magnitude on such a sensitive topic as oil would have developed important social movements and public debate on the environmental impacts, questioning the fossil fuel-led model of development (see for example the wide debate on fracking: Celis et al. 2013, Simonelli 2014). There are also examples from other countries from the periphery: in Ecuador the discovery of an important amount of oil in the Yasuní National Park triggered an important public debate on environmental issues and it was a key issue during the 2013 presidential elections (Larrea, Warnars 2009; Marx 2010). Nothing like this has happened in Rio de Janeiro or in Brazil, where the aforementioned mobilisation on the oil field has concentrated only on its privatization and did not touch environmental impacts.

The same can be said of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games hosted in Rio de Janeiro. Despite the environment being the third pillar of the Olympic Movement (IOC 2010), the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro failed to maintain all its promises of environmental friendliness (Boykoff, Mascarenhas 2016; Mascarenhas et al. 2017; Mascarenhas 2018). However, environment protection was not the main critique of urban social movements to this mega-event, while they focused more on the creation of a city of exception and its impacts on the urban poor (Almeida, Graeff 2016; Richmond, Garmany 2016).

The absence of a manifest environmental consciousness by urban social movements in Rio de Janeiro is therefore striking, particularly from a social ecology point of view, which directly links social oppression and domination with ecological disasters. It would seem crucial for them to consider and take action to protect the environment, not only because of the local negative environmental issues, but also for the broad climate change effects connected with them. Several recent publications (Maia 2008; Egler 2007; Confalonieri, Marinho 2007; Muehe, Neves 2007) commissioned by the Pereira Passos Institute for the seminar “Rio - Next 100 Years” - The City against Global Warming agreed that Rio de Janeiro is already experiencing increasing temperatures and rains; in the future it will be affected by increasing sea levels, which will threaten a large part of the city, as well as by more frequent extreme weather events with destructive potential (heavy rain, flooding, landslides, oceanic events).

There are various analytical frameworks, which can help us understand why urban social movements in Rio de Janeiro seem not to be concerned
with environmental issues. One of them is that set out by McGranahan and Satterthwaite (2000), which distinguishes between a Green agenda and a Brown agenda: the former is framed around nature preservation, the latter around improving the condition of the population. The Brown agenda is concerned first and foremost with human health and does not have a general overview of the ecosystem problems considered in the Green agenda (McGranahan, Satterthwaite 2000). In Brazil the first is mainly advocated by *indios* (indigenous people) and *quilombola* (descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves who escaped from slave plantations) settlements in non-urban contexts, the second by groups, mainly urban poor, impacted by urban environmental problems (Lopes 2006). Moreover, as stressed by Porto (2012), urban environmental problems in Brazil are usually not considered as part of any ‘environmental justice’ agenda, despite the fact that “an expressive portion of the urban population lives in slums and places without appropriate urban infrastructure, frequently in risk areas of flooding, garbage sites, industrial pollution, and major accidents” (102). From this perspective, urban social movements in Rio de Janeiro focus on the Brown agenda, seeing it as an integrated part of the struggle for a *reforma urbana*. In different Brazilian cities urban social movements fight for sanitation and housing together with “associations organized by residents around waste and hazardous sites or by workers contaminated by chemicals” (Porto 2012, 102). Thus the focus of urban social movements is on environmental effects on humans and this concern is problem solving centred, often focussing on the solutions to specific, stringent and contingent necessities of the poor population. My interviews in Rio de Janeiro also stressed the severe issues of housing and sanitation in favelas. These are seen as political problems. Priscilla, an activist-researcher that I interviewed, is quite clear in underlining that these problems can be defined as “diseases of poverty”. She also adds that “they are political diseases, if people would have sanitation they would not be sick, children would not die”.

What is missing from this conception is a connection between the Green and Brown agenda. When I asked Pedro and Matheus, both living in favelas and active in urban social movements, about the environment, they both stressed the importance of trees in favelas; therefore interpreting the environmental question in a rather narrow way, failing to consider wider problems. These answers were not followed up in the interviews, but seem in accord with a ‘Brown-agenda-only’ view: environmental issues are addressed only when contingently impacting on humans, with a very limited view of the links between social and ecological problems.

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8 While the term *indio* is often derogatory in Spanish, I use here the term ‘indios’ to refer to indigenous people because it is the term they use to call themselves in Portuguese.
During my time in Rio de Janeiro I never saw important demonstrations or debates on environmental issues. I witnessed only few small static demonstrations: for example for the *Pare a TKCSA!* campaign or for animal rights. The same applies to the critiques of mega-events/mega-projects that have always been framed by urban social movements in Brown agenda terms, always from an economic or human perspective and in very few cases from an environmental one, as evident from the content of flyers or slogans used in mobilisations. Only a few people raised these issues in assemblies and meetings but they were normally ignored and participation in (static) demonstrations was very low. The people more involved on these issues were indios from the *Aldeia Marakanã* collective.

The evidence of this lack of attention given to the environmental sphere is supported by the lack of environmental themes coming out from the interview analysis. Only members of the *Aldeia Marakanã* collective and Lucio, an activist and long-time member of an international environment NGO, articulated a discourse on the environment and underlined my suppositions. The movement in Rio de Janeiro is not interested in environmental issues and embraces or overlooks the western concept of ‘development’. The Brown agenda, which aims to ameliorate peoples’ material living conditions, is linked to the idea of development and whatever obstructs this development is seen negatively. A Green agenda, that questions the model of development (opposing deforestation, greenhouse emissions, Belomonte projects, for the preservation of ecosystems, etc.), is often ostracised and seen as a bourgeois or a core country priority. Speaking about the Brazilian social movements, Lucio is very clear:

Historically, the Left itself does not have this connection with the environmental issue, the Left also had and still has this developmental idea, in order to have progress, you need to develop the industry and to develop the industry you do whatever is necessary.

Urban social movements do not differentiate themselves from the broader Brazilian society which continues with the same old idea of development (Cava 2013) and they seem to be linked to a heterodox conception of Marxism where progress is seen as industrial development which must be achieved at any cost. In urban social movement view, rapid industrialization would lead to better conditions for the workers, in a country where many people are still below the poverty line. In this way, whoever has an environmental concern could be labelled as right wing or conservative and against the progress of the working class. In this thinking, environmental costs are not taken into account or are unevaluated; moreover, other forms of ‘development’ are not explored. Nevertheless, Brazil is a country facing incredible development, but is still at an early stage of market-driven change: it still has the opportunity to choose a different path.
Sustainable development has been a pillar of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party, PT) government since it was founded (Sader 2013). This approach has been widely criticised in the broad literature for its embedded contradiction of putting together sustainability and development (Redclift 1987, Campbell 1996, Banerjee 2003).

The importance of the discourse of sustainable development can also be observed in the Brazilian Green Party: despite being formed in the 1980s by Left ex-guerrilla members, it is commonly seen as a centre party and its Manifesto states very clearly that the party “does not trap itself in the narrow polarization between left and right. It is at the front” (Partido Verde 2005, 1). The Green Party is also trapped in the ‘sustainability’ paradigm, in that it advocates sustainable development and Green technology, not deeply challenging the system. This attitude can be seen as a legacy of the perception of Brazilian Green politics during its development the 70s and 80s. As Jacobi (2003) points out: social movements were more concerned about meeting basic needs, and also the military leadership was managing a strong economy. At that time:

The ecologist’s proposals had no influence on the future of Brazilian society. [Still today], in a discourse where the developmental myth appears as only one capable of overcoming the terrible problems facing the country, the discourse on the need to preserve the environment emerged as the antithesis of national development. (Jacobi 2003, 6-7)

Environmental issues are thus not on the public agenda nor are they a major concern of the population. For this reason, urban social movements do not strongly focus on environmental issues. In Brazilian society the preferred actor on environmental matters remains the NGOs, which are however limited in their sphere of action and accomplishments (Alonso, Costa 2002).

The Brazilian national economy today dictates the unrestricted and uncontrolled growth of Brazilian cities, with grave environmental consequences. Despite the massive environmental problems that affect Rio de Janeiro and Brazil, few activists pay attention to these issues. Contemporary urban social movements focus their attention on the urgent question of survival, which is still not guaranteed for a large part of the urban population (Shigetomi, Makino 2009). In a society of sharp class divisions, they prioritize the fight against class domination, and they see environmental problems as secondary to the basic needs of human life. Urban social movements follow a pattern in which only when a basic standard of living is ensured and minimal working rights are guaranteed, can they start claiming other rights and concentrate on environmental problems.

This failure to address ecological issues clearly weakens the struggle against capitalist domination, and fails to identify the nature of the cur-
rent crises or comprehend their full scope. This also makes it difficult for us to find viable and holistic alternatives. As social ecology explains, only by addressing the concept of domination over nature as stemming from the domination of humans over humans can social movements work for a real alternative that reconnects humans to nature. Only by acknowledging that current social and environmental crises, as connected together, are structurally built into the very system of capitalism can the social movements start building holistic and viable alternatives. Moreover, the class struggle that is still intensely present in countries from the semi-periphery, like Brazil, or periphery, could, in a social ecology framework, assume a new centrality and meaning as struggles against one form of domination of humans by humans: it is the broader concept of domination that provides the framework for explaining social struggles in their specific movement contexts, as well as their geographical, cultural, and historical peculiarities. Without falling into a Marxist understanding of the role of the proletariat, social ecology is able to advance the class component in social movement theory, looking at it through the lens of domination. According to this analysis, then, we can interpret social movements primarily as struggles against domination, even though this struggle is framed differently in different contexts. Class struggle can then be integrated into a coherent struggle against all forms of domination. However, when urban social movements allow, referring to the Brown agenda, the struggle over economic concerns to exclude ecological concerns, which is what Brazilian activists currently do, their vision and sphere of action are greatly limited. The holistic approach of social ecology can help urban social movements to have a deeper understanding of the social and ecological impacts of various projects. At the same time, it could be used to harmonize the Brown and Green agenda together, offering more comprehensive solutions that address the man’s impacts on humans and non-humans. Finally, social ecology offers a solution that goes beyond the dichotomy of Brown and Green agenda, acknowledging that environmental crisis stems from human’ domination.

5 Conclusions

The current form of urban development, shaped by the capitalist system (Harvey 1973, 2001, 2012) and based on the denial of the right to the city and spatial justice, is not what urban social movements envision. This denial takes various forms, such as gentrification, eviction, socio-spatial segregation, urban poverty, mobility poverty, etc. and is implemented with the support of governmental structures that work to accommodate the interests of elites. In Rio de Janeiro’s current urban development, urban social movements have understood that the scale of the use of mega-projects and mega-events facilitate capital reproduction in the interest of these elites.
With this understanding of the urban crisis, urban social movements prioritize what they see as more urgent and impactful. Urban social movements’ perception of urban crises is framed by different aspects of those crises: the scale of the phenomena (e.g. the scale of denial of the right to the city); its presence/importance in the popular discourse; the direct impact on people’s everyday lives (for example how big and urgent those impacts can be; if a favela is evicted, urban social movements will run there to support residents, leaving other struggles for later). Mega-events have a very vast scale: they appear as a new face of neo-colonialism, pushed by foreign investments; they are part of the popular, national and international discourse and, because of their reshaping of the city, are impacting on everyday lives on a time span that lasts for several years. Also, transportation issues cover the entire urban scale and are within the daily discourse of the whole population and impact on everyday lives, as seen in the 2013 mobilisations (Venturini 2016). On the contrary, the impacts on everyday lives of other mega-projects such as the ThyssenKrupp CSA, despite a vast scale, are not immediately seen or perceived by the population and are not widely discussed in the society.

So they are yet not a goal for urban social movements that are constrained to focus on more ‘urgent’ issues. The same applies to the environmental question, as mentioned in this work: the impacts are not felt in peoples’ everyday lives, and even when an environmental related tragedy happens, the reasons are to be found in bad governance more than in climate change. Despite the huge dimensions of environmental issues for the urban poor (Martinez Alier 2005), the popular discourses are framed around the Brown agenda.

Urban social movements are committed to action and are forced by their limited resources to focus on certain struggles, in order to fight for direct gains in everyday battles, to solve urgent, life threatening issues. Mega-events are perfect national/international stages for protests in order to send powerful messages of dissent. While this work focussed on groups acting in the 2013-2016 mobilisations, these findings express a historical trend in Rio de Janeiro.

Urban social movements have developed a critique of contemporary city development very similar to the one proposed by social ecology, where a rampant urbanization is interpreted as being led by the advantage of the few and at the expense of the poor. However, no work on mega-projects and mega-events have been carried out in the social ecology tradition. Furthermore, the analysis of mega-events is connected to the need to understand neo-colonialism, a form of domination that social ecology should take more widely into account (Venturini 2015). Despite it goes beyond the scope of this work, mega-projects and neocolonialism are key topics where social ecology can learn from social movements.
If, on one side, social ecology can benefit from learning from urban social movements’ analysis, on the other, social ecology could inform their practices and visions. In particular, the use of the concept of ‘domination’ allows a more holistic vision of the social issues. Social ecology does not single out specific struggles, but moves holistically against domination, with a broader understanding of crises. Social ecology, highlighting the link of all forms of domination, not only calls for the coordination of different struggles that urban social movements pursue, in order to reinforce them, but also highlights the need to focus on a change that is broader and more fundamental.

For example, it is possible to highlight that urban social movements are concentrating all their efforts and critiques on the mega-events, forgetting the impacts of the mega-projects that are being planned in parallel in the State of Rio de Janeiro, as for example during the mobilisations in 2013-2016 (Cava 2013; Cava, Cocco 2014; Venturini 2016). The reasons for this approach are several: firstly, they are considering what they are seeing happening in the city; secondly, they are focussed only the investments that are in the main stream, having to face the enormous number of fronts of struggle; thirdly, they have not produced a critique of the idea of development, that lays at the base of these projects. Moreover, urban social movements, specifically because of their urban nature and manifestation, are often unable to detect the connection of the future of their urban environment with the broad territory of the State and the capitalist development of its economy. The mega-projects are going not only to have a dramatic impact on the social and economic future of Rio de Janeiro, but also are going to take a heavy environmental toll. Let’s work together toward the “right to be environmentalist” (Barca 2014, 21).
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