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"Survival" of the fittest, "sheltering" of the mightiest: competition and regulation in contemporary urban housing markets

Opening remarks

This essay mobilizes popular insights about the "law of the jungle" to conceptualize and critique prevalent consumption and policy attitudes in urban environments, with a focus on residential infrastructure. A phrase used metaphorically to describe a given situation where competition, aggression, and "survival of the fittest" prevail, it is here used in order to formulate a new characterization of contemporary cities as environments where there is minimal housing regulation or oversight (architectural occupation as survival-of-the-fittest battle), and where individual dwellers are left to operate without significant constraints.

In the first section of the paper, I introduce a commonplace interpretation of the "jungle metaphor", commenting on sets of characteristics and values which are associated with it. In the second section of the paper, I paint a portrait of contemporary socio-economic environments, with a focus on urbanity and its distributive ordering of housing resources. I describe these environments as constructed (formal arrangements; architecture and urbanism) and policed (institutional arrangements; governments and state authorities) in manners which acutely—and problematically—emphasizes market laissez-faire and self-interest. In the third section of the paper, I link this portrait of the contemporary city to survival-of-the-fittest jungle-like spaces, commenting on rivalrous competition between dwellers and, in the fourth and concluding section, I briefly propose one possible, normatively desirable form of urban market regulations.

1. The "law of the jungle" – commonplace metaphor in popular language and political philosophy

On October 13, 2022, Joseph Borell, the serving High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, shared the following thoughts with members of the Bruges-based European Diplomatic Academy:

> Europe is a garden. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social harmony that humanity could create. The rest of the world is not exactly a garden. Most of the rest of the world is a jungle and the jungle can invade the garden. Gardeners must tend to it, but they cannot protect the garden by building walls.

Borell's remarks prompted a controversy, with critics of the speech highlighting racist undertones in associating the image of the garden with the territories and arrangements of Europe, and the image of the jungle with the territories and arrangements which fall outside of Europe's borders.[1] Borell argued in response that his metaphor did not betray some sort of "colonial Euro-centric" attitude, but rather alluded to the precision of the jungle metaphor in capturing, in his words, "the lawlessness and disorder that currently rule world politics" (Liboreiro).

Such metaphorical statements operate under pretence, implying and introducing a so-called game of make-believe: Borell's audience—and subsequent readers and hearers—engage in the process of imagining one thing (Europe; the rest of the world) as if was another thing (a garden; a jungle), in order to better understand that first thing (Walton 48). Two seemingly unrelated subject matters are joined; their respective values and properties, mingled. In the European Diplomatic Academy speech instance, the mingling was rightly called out, its objectionable pretences identified and, for the most part, refused. In other words, many critics of the speech refused to participate in Borell's make-believe game, denouncing its value-tinted transfers—its metaphorical meaning. There exist, of course, varying interpretations of the sets of characteristics

1 In this essay, I refer to a subset of "jungle" metaphors and value-tinted images; there exists many more. Worth of mention is the linkage between "jungle" environments and "rainforest" environments, where the latter has come to replace the former to describe tropical forest environments, given the pejorative undertones that are now implied with the use of the term "jungle". This type of substitution points to the (seldom challenged) dominance of certain Western value hierarchies. See, among others, Slater, 4.

and values which underlie a given metaphor.[2] Despite its noted controversy, Borell's "interpretative" or "evaluative" path endures within influential Western political debates, among legislators, media figures, and the public at large. This endurance (and influence) warrants further examination; conceptual definitions and analyses should somehow reflect something of their commonplace understanding (Swift 22).

Borell's characterization of jungle-like environments as lawless and disorderly, as spaces of anarchy, confusion and unruliness, is, indeed, a commonplace one (Slater 4). When members of the European Diplomatic Academy heard this portion of Borell's geopolitical speech, they arguably made sense of it in simple, contradictory terms. The space of the garden, or Europe, is imagined as pretty, clean, as tended to, orderly, harmonious, calm, systematic—these qualificatives capture both an aesthetic and an ideological dimension. The set of values captured by the garden are positive ones, tending towards stability, safety, and tranquillity. The space of the jungle, or the rest of the world, is imagined as messy, wild, as out of hand, wicked, dangerous, ungovernable—these qualificatives capture opposite aesthetic and ideological dimensions. The set of values captured by the jungle are negative ones, tending towards unpredictability, disorientation, hazard, and vulnerability.

In the space of the jungle, power and coercion govern relations and exchanges: this relational aspect of the metaphor is key to its correct understanding. Again, it is not only (or necessarily) the material composition of the environment that is threatening, but the very nature of the ways in which individuals relate to one another in this environment. When Borell speaks of invasion, of lawlessness and disorder, he first seeks to illustrate a specific set of interactions between persons. This set of interactions is indeed characterized by power, coercion, strength, hostility: in the jungle, individuals are self-interested, they compete and seek to dominate one another.

The traditional political philosophical literature is notoriously ripe with references to this type of cut-throat milieus. Social contract theorists like Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau used the jungle to point to man's so-called state of nature,

2 I should clearly spell out the non-universal nature of the meaning one associates with metaphors. Meaning is informed by one's culture (think of cultural oppositions between Global North and Global South, for instance) and by one's perspective (think of anthropocentric attitudes towards the environment, versus ecocentric or holistic ones). I choose to focus on Borell's understanding, as it remains predominant in socio-economic and political spheres, and continues to be mobilize, to wrongful effects, by diverse figures of influence in the West.

where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 78). This state of nature knows one rule, and one rule only: the survival of the fittest. Or, to seize this rule in a contemporary language: in the "jungle", stronger agents are able to take resources from weaker agents (Piccione, Rubinstein 883). Strength, domination, power—these are to be exerted without constraint or oversight. This world is one of oppressors and oppressed. Only the mightiest can thrive; the remainders are left to struggle and, ultimately, fail. A representative of the European Union, Borell, was manifesting pride in the socio-political arrangements of his institution, as they formalize progress and betterment, a literal removal from the aforementioned hostile state and space. Away from the jungle, emboldened by politically robust protections, individuals can now hope to relate as equals, and flourish.

To be sure, human flourishing typically implies more than just basic survival or material wealth; it encompasses aspects such as happiness, fulfillment, personal growth, and the realization of individuals' potential.[3] The present account does not depend on a particular normative framework—it only (non-controversially) supposes that we ought to prioritize human flourishing as a central objective for societal formal and institutional organization. A "good" society should already work to provide environmental conditions which enable people to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives—develop talents, pursue interests; experience a sense of satisfaction and self-determination (Nussbaum 71–73).[4]

2. Hostile cities, or new conditions in the metropolitan economic landscape

Now, one simple question: in light of ambitions to develop (and maintain) human environments characterized, in effect, by politically robust protections where individuals can now hope to relate as equals and flourish, how do contemporary cities fare? The conceptual division between garden-like environments and jungle-like environments provides one fruitful framework to make sense

3 Flourishing, in itself, is a term that connects nicely with imaginations of jungles and gardens – they are environments where it is easy or hard to develop "solid roots", to grow stunted or with strength, and the likes. Plants, human individuals: both seek to thrive and prosper in their given environment. Which environment, then, offers the "best conditions of life"? As was mentioned, one's answer will depend on her way to make sense (make-believe) of jungle and garden metaphors. Under the interpretation that I outlined, which associates jungles with danger and chaos, flourishing is hindered.

4 On my account, these conditions represent "indicators" that one lives within a so-called garden-like milieu.

of the way we materially organize our societies—and so, our lives. My analysis does not depend on precise locations or study cases, but rather treat contemporary urban milieus as characterized, for the most part, by dominant features of occupation and exchange (Castells 237; Harvey 69, 108).[5] "Life in the city" is rapidly becoming synonymous with "life in society": future urban life is bound to increase, becoming a global living condition for a majority of individuals.[6] By 2050, 7 out of 10 people are indeed expected to live in cities (United Nations 2024). In this context, identifying dominant features of human occupation and exchange in contemporary cities allows us to anticipate social development patterns, which can in turn be rejected and resisted, or embraced and strengthened.

To recuperate Borell's comparison, do present-day urban environments resemble gardens, or do they resemble jungles? Again, the comparison works to capture and evaluate a specific set of interactions between individuals who depend on specific basic resources to lead a life worth living. Cities are space-bound pools of resources—within these given pools, I claim that the basic resource which matters most to survival-of-the-fittest analyses is housing.[7] This is key. Here, linking urban milieus to the stability and pleasantness of the garden, or to the hostility and lawlessness of the jungle, already begins with considering persons' relations to dwellings, as these dwellings are resources which satisfy their basic corporeal and mental need for shelter (Brandl 87–88).

5 Key works in urban studies have detailed and analysed power inequalities, exploring how urban environments reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. In addition to the cited Castells (*The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*) and Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*), the classic texts of Henri Lefebvre (*The Right to the City*, 1968) Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961), Mike Davis (*City of Quartz*, 1990), or John Logan and Harvey Moloch (*Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*, 1987) have provided witty, critical insights into the dynamics and challenges of urban developments.

6 My focus on urbanity and one's life in cities fits a current trend, where the architectural design of institutions, housing and infrastructural objects is imagined through the lens of the "urban" and its associated proximities, resources, rhythms, and values. I have proposed that to think of human societies strongly relates to thinking urbanely. In a similar vein, to think of architecture, or to think "architecturally", is already to think urbanely; the ostensible hegemony of cities is located right at the heart of value-hierarchical considerations about past and present, ruralism and urbanism, feudalism and capitalism, agrarianism and industrialism, and individuality and community. Again, these value hierarchies underlie normative assessments of built milieus.

7 Accounts which posit the "primacy" of housing with regards to the satisfaction of needs and liberties refer to situatedness, or what Jeremy Waldron has termed "people's situated nature" (296), a space-related condition for the fulfillment of all other rights.

UN-Habitat, the United Nations Human Settlements program for human settlements and sustainable urban development, reminds us that well over a billion people living in or near cities are not adequately housed (United Nations 2009). Be it in the richer Global North, or in growing countries of the Global South, very large proportions of urban dwellers lack suitable homes, despite agreed-upon understandings of shelter as fundamental to human life. In times of crisis, national and municipal government expenditures on housing are usually among the first to be cut. Dislodgments linked to conflicts, natural disasters or discriminatory contemporary market pressures are a commonplace reality: millions are forcibly evicted, or threatened with forced eviction, from their homes every year. They take a variety of forms: slum clearance, gentrification, foreclosure, demolition of public housing, and the privatization of public space. Urban homelessness issues are found across all nations, wealthy or poor. Historic and on-going practices of dispossession result in driving members of minority groups in and out of cities, where their lack of access to private property makes them dependent on precarious slum dwelling or inadequate public housing. Social housing scarcity tends to be "reified", transformed into a "natural and inevitable constraint" that policy makers merely ought to manage (Clarke et al. 565). House architecture has transformed into an exploitable, financialized commodity; shelters are hardly ever provided for free to those who can't afford it, adding to life-imperilling situations and circumstances.

Architects, urban planners, city managers, state officials and property investors share a responsibility in the increasing production of unaffordable dwellings, but they don't operate isolated from each other; they jointly participate in broader political and economic processes. Global financial speculation is pressing most governments to deregulate and dismantle welfare services—the commodification of housing is an "indispensable companion" in the commodification of the whole urban environment (Martinez 8). For all intents and purposes, city spaces and architectures have become environments in which transactions are governed by "speculative volatility" and marked by economic rivalry and coercion (Goldman 368). Housing schemes are planned and built in ways which seek the "prevention, restriction or distortion of competition" among actors and other economic treaty signatories (EEA Agreement 1).[8] Recent structural changes whereby "massive amounts of global capital have been

8 In the legislative context of the European Economic Area, housing (a socio-economic good, central in welfare provisions) is regulated as "competitive commodity", in the precise sense that it is a resource subject to EEA rulings on competition. While there exist "drain valves" clauses, like the "Services of General Economic Interest", certain

invested in housing as a commodity, as security for financial instruments that are traded on global markets, and as a means of accumulating wealth" have had dramatic consequences on urban dwellers' fair enjoyment of housing resources, transforming cities into deregulated, hostile territories where securing shelter is a struggle for too many (Fahra 7).

This sort of brief, general reporting on securing urban housing today indicates a marked difficulty of sustaining its protections and provisions, even when they are pursued as minimal. It indicates an environment marked by unpredictability, hazard, and vulnerability. In other words, it indicates an evident conceptual connection to the "jungle", as interpreted and detailed above.

3. Competition: fighting for housing, surviving in the city

The contemporary urban jungle is a competitive landscape where businesses (real estate management companies) and individuals (property-renting or property-owning dwellers) fiercely compete for the access to urban resources—they compete for developable lots and, most importantly, housing units. Lots correspond to a first type of resource: land. The value of the resource links to potential, future developments. Housing units correspond to a second type of resource: buildings. The value of the resource links to its usage for the satisfaction of basic human needs, like cooking, sleeping, washing, excreting.[9] In the previous section, I conceptualized cities as "space-bound" pools of resources that are, in present times, minimally regulated. Again, some of Borrell's comments capture a key component which characterize that pool—its "spatial finitude" or "openness". His precision of an imaginary of walls, with an outside and an inside, reminds us that both "jungles" and "gardens" are, to various degrees, finite. As territories, they begin and end in given places. This matters a lot to an account which seeks to highlight competition for limited spatial and material resources as an apt, critical framework for understanding existing cities. Put

housing schemes are bound to correspond to acts of "prevention, restriction or distortion of competition" among signatories.

9 What's more, and crucially, housing is a *rival* good, because one's use of the resource practically decreases the total available amount, and it is an excludable good, because others can be prohibited from using one's housing resource. So, at the level of one "resource unit", the satisfaction of the corporeal needs of one individual (or, to be more precise, of the collection of individuals who make up a household) excludes the satisfaction of the corporeal needs of another. Of course, this rival feature is of great conceptual significance in uses of jungle-like metaphors like mine.

simply, if the "pool" can be densified and extended, we should not worry about resource accessibility within it.

Increasing housing supplies in the face of scarcity, the insight goes, can be achieved by densification and advances in technology (building higher, using alternative construction materials). In line with anti-regulatory rhetoric and other markets-as-best-organizers-of-demand-and-supply attitudes, this sort of insight works to highlight competition and rivalry as correctible contingency. If right, this greatly diminishes the significance of my analysis, as it supposedly diminishes the vulnerability of competing individuals with little power to secure access to urban housing resources. Two short answers can be opposed to the claim that, as a city can grow and become denser, harsh cutthroat competition for resources within it can be defused.

First, to highlight what was already mentioned above, it is not only (or necessarily) the material composition of the environment that is threatening, but the very nature of the ways in which individuals relate to one another in this environment. More built resources in the urban environment—a quantitative increase—does not translate to an increased access to dwellings, if given ownership patterns maintain individuals in unpredictable and risky housing circumstances. Real estate management companies or wealthy "landlords" have time and again shown a capacity for "hoarding" units in urban settings, using their greater purchase power to do so (Kohn 7, 94–95). Second, I think that insights which posit housing supply scarcity as "naturally" and "simply" solved by densifying and technological activities misrepresent the type of scarcity that results from building in city environments.

In effect, while we can agree that the physical limitations to creating more housing units are not absolute per se, we should acknowledge that these nonetheless are strongly operative limitations. Societies can expand their housing supply in urban territories, but they do so under hard constraints. Such constraints indicate, among other, that a given resource's supply expands at much slower rates than general growth rates—to rephrase, the supply can only increase at a lower rate than the economy as a whole.[10] Urban housing is paradigmatic in its being subject to hard constraints; as a "large-scale, material, situated" good,

10 These considerations can be contrasted with the environmental philosophical literature on natural resources, where a resource's exhaustibility links to special duties of conservation and distribution. Because of absolute scarcity of the resource (think of fossil fuels, groundwater, rare minerals, forests), its management tends to be regulated in ways which (seek to) ensure protection for fair present and future usages. Non-exhaustible resources tend to fall under another set of distributive considerations, where they emerge

it manifests short and medium term low supply elasticity, and so, is governed by hard scarcity (Tyssedal). This feature strengthens the rivalry proper to housing resources, and indicate that, despite hypotheticals where a city's insufficient pool of housing resources ought to be increased through densifying and technological efforts, the desired increase is likely to "take time" until it manifests, and so, is likely to fail to meet the urgent dwelling demands of the present. In the meantime, conditions of unpredictability, hazard, and vulnerability are held—tidying up the jungle is no small task. Of course, most (rival and exclusive) basic goods and resources' access is dependent on a society's extractive and productive capacities, but it appears that the constructed, situated nature of urban housing resources does connect them more tightly to environmental factors (congestion, crowding) than other basic goods.

Economic imperatives that set individuals in hostile competition "replicate primeval conditions where survival is based on a struggle against all others" (Walker 120). "Jungle interactions" are distinguished by power, coercion, strength, hostility: in jungle-like milieus, individuals compete fiercely, seeking to dominate one another to secure access to the limited, architectural goods (resources) which, through sheltering functions, can ensure their basic bodily survival. In this specific built environment, allocation rules are chiefly driven by agents using shear economic power to appropriate dwelling resources, with little consideration for overall social outcomes (Piccione, Rubinstein 883–885). Justice, sufficiency, equality; stability, safety, tranquillity—these principles and conditions receive little consideration indeed. It does appear that, in cities across the Global North and South, present-day market economies have normalized the "law of nature", or "law of the jungle"—they have normalized the logic of capital to dire ends.[11] In other words, they have normalized spatial and material distributions where only the mightiest economic agents can thrive, while weaker entities are practically deprived of basic resources; while they are left to struggle and fail. As such, we can correctly, conceptually maintain the commonplace interpretation of the jungle metaphor as a tool to denounce

as "commodities", the distribution of which can be deregulated, opened to dominant market transactions.

11 Refer to the cases of contemporary cities like Vienna or Helsinki as interesting counter-examples, where a strong (social-democratic) tradition of social housing building and management by municipal authorities has led to "less dire" ends (Altreiter, Litschauer 217–218; Marquardt 363). Fuller accounts of the legal and institutional tools that "preserves" parts of urban housing markets from the logic of capital falls outside the paper's scope, but these tools provide key precedents for future attempts to undo this logic.

prevalent attitudes, expectations, and rulings regarding the individual satisfaction of situated basic needs in present-day, financialized urban contexts—and so, of individual and collective responsibilities (or lack thereof) regarding basic shelter need protections.

4. Concluding remarks

Urban landscapes are spaces which significantly organize human life. They do so through different procedures and customs (laws, policies), as well as through different built and spatial arrangements (architectural objects and in-between spaces). In this essay, I have theorized such landscapes as ones where interactions between agents is marked in critical ways by competing attitudes. This follows from the fact that, in contemporary cities, housing resources are characterized by specific forms of scarcity, which link to distributive patterns and a strong limitation on resource production. A society, or city, where individuals must harshly compete for basic resources already manifests some troubling resemblance to the jungle evoked by Borell: messy, wild, as out of hand, wicked, dangerous, ungovernable—this society, or city, does not provide its citizens, or inhabitants, with the stability, safety, and tranquillity that enable human flourishing. Let us ask one more time: what aesthetic and ideological dimensions are we, in effect, cultivating in our (urban) society-building ventures? I have argued that we ought to preoccupy ourselves with both the material composition of a given environment and the ways in which individuals relate to one another in this environment; we should work to better identify—and oppose—jungle-like features which are presently made manifest in our cities.

To bring the essay to a partial close, I would point to the emerging literature on infrastructural resilience, where arguments for ensuring resource accessibility for all are tied to option conservation, as well as diversity of form (Teodoro 1357*)*. Such arguments do link the flexibility of infrastructures—political, economical, architectural—with formal diversity, which they posit as allowing for bettered future need satisfaction, as well as lowered overall transition costs in the face of coming hardships. If we briefly apply the insight to the "urban jungle" challenge, we can advise the following: working to undo the severe rivalry and economic coercion which typifies so many cities' housing markets might already begin with regulating housing resources in ways which avoid the dominance of one ownership form. Market economies cannot be replaced by state ones, but what regulations should aim for is a diverse "housing park ownership portfolio", with a mix of publicly and privately owned units, of rentals and purchases, of sizes and household types (Bradecki, Twardoch 18,

29–30; Mohorčich 2–4).[12] Stabilization and protection tools abound, in zoning, construction, and management activities—these tools, well-tried and manifold, ought to be used in constellations, not in isolation (Saiz 11ff.). Mixed configurations which, for example, combine targeted loan subsidies and partial rent caps, where a ceiling applies only to a portion of the city's market, work to improve supply-and-demand price mechanisms in key spaces (Kholodilin et al. 3; Berry 73ff.). Such urban landscapes emerge as resilient—and so, as closer to the sought-after sufficiency, stability, safety. Diversity of built forms (diverse architecture distribution) and of property forms (diverse ownership distribution) in urban environment represents one possible answer to the challenges of the jungle—after all, gardens can *and should be* beautifully diverse, too.

This concluding linkage between "gardens" and "diversity" points to possible, further inquiries into society's desirable shaping of urban environments. To reject the "law of the jungle" as overseeing our cities must not be interpreted into a pledge towards unification, seclusion, and standardization: ultimately, and arguably, it is the diversification of forms that amounts to resilience and socio-political health. In his seminal "On liberty", John Stuart Mill warns his readers against mankind having unanimously accepted one given form; against unanimity and homogeneity, positing diversity as "resource" for human cultures, an essential "good" that ought to be preserved for their good development and strengthening (41, 45–46). The lesson is worth emphasis, again: gardens can *and should be* beautifully diverse, too.

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12 As such, we can perhaps say that the regulative proposal is not about "replacing" the market, but "diluting" it.

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| Abstract

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This essay mobilizes popular insights about the "law of the jungle" to conceptualize and critique prevalent consumption and policy attitudes in urban environments, with a focus on residential infrastructure. A phrase used metaphorically to describe a given situation where competition, aggression, and "survival of the fittest" prevail, it is here used in order to formulate a new characterization of contemporary cities as environments where there is minimal housing regulation or oversight (architectural

occupation as survival-of-the-fittest battle), and where individual dwellers are left to operate without significant constraints. In the first section of the paper, I introduce a commonplace interpretation of the "jungle metaphor", commenting on sets of characteristics and values which are associated with it. In the second section of the paper, I paint a portrait of contemporary socio-economic environments, with a focus on urbanity and its distributive ordering of housing resources. I describe these environments as constructed (formal arrangements; architecture and urbanism) and policed (institutional arrangements; governments and state authorities) in manners which acutely—and problematically—emphasize market laissez-faire and self-interest. In the third section of the paper, I link this portrait of the contemporary city to survival-of-the-fittest jungle-like spaces, commenting on rivalrous competition between dwellers and, in the fourth and concluding section, I briefly propose one possible, normatively desirable form of urban market regulations.

Keywords: housing, jungle law, competition, scarcity, laissez-faire, market regulation, urbanity, urban land development

| Bio

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