Autistic cities: critical urbanism and the politics of neurodiversity

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AUTISTIC CITIES:
CRITICAL URBANISM AND THE POLITICS OF NEURODIVERSITY

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Abstract

Autism and neurodiversity are key topics in current public debate and in the social sciences. A vast multidisciplinary literature has explored spatial dimensions of neurodiversity, particularly by analyzing autistic experiences in private and public spaces and the design of autistic-friendly environments. Building on this literature and by presenting my personal experience as the father of an autistic child, this paper explores connections between critical urban studies and the social and political dimensions of neurodiversity. Focusing on different meanings, positions, and discourses shaping autistic experiences and neurodivergent identities in the capitalist city, the paper draws on the notions of 'queering' and 'cripping' autism. Lastly, the paper presents four tentative propositions about autistic cities, with two goals in mind: imagining more just, liveable and empowering cities, and suggesting that critical urban studies can themselves be stimulated by the encounter with neurodiversities.

Keywords

Autism, neurodiversity, autistic city, queering autism, neurodiversicity

Introduction

In an interview with activists from Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) appearing in a recent issue of CITY, Humphry et al. (2020) consider the right to a city that does not disable its inhabitants, and an urban that is made *by*, *with* and *for* disabled people. They challenge the representation of disabled people as vulnerable, because victimization marginalizes them and downplays their role in the production of urban space. As the capitalist city disables those who show lower levels of functioning in work and consumption (Kitchin, 1998; Russell and Malhotra, 2002), seeking to empower disabled people is entirely consistent with the fight against the capitalist city. This call for a city that does not disable people—it is suggested—entails mobilizing different forms of epistemic and representational work, including alternative insights and theories.

This paper will explore this latter perspective by developing connections between autism and critical urban studies, reflecting on the many ways the urban is imbricated in a system of shifting relations with neurodiversity. The aim is to create space to think about autism through and with spatial processes, and to contribute to decentering essentialist and pathologizing understandings of autism as a fixed identity associated with disablement. The paper's underlying hypothesis is that not only can critical urban studies add to our understanding and framing of autism, but urban studies themselves can be cross-fertilized by this complex topic.

This paper chiefly explores autism and neurodivergence in relation to identity politics. Since the 1990s, the growth of autistic self-advocacy and the neurodiversity movement have brought fresh perspectives to bear on autism theories, research, and practices, raising questions about the public identity of autistic people. Increasingly, medically imposed diagnoses are being challenged: according to advocates of the neurodiversity movement, common symptoms and behaviors of people classified as non-neurotypical are normal expressions of human function, or natural human variations, rather than disorders to be diagnosed, treated or cured. Accordingly, I argue for a strategy of *queering autism* to affirm and celebrate neurodivergence, and to subvert stigma.

The urban dimension is crucial for three major reasons. First, autistic identities are developed, negotiated, contested and narrated within society, and in this sense autism is, to a certain extent, a spatial condition of difference. The regimes of normativity inscribed in urban space draw boundaries separating the appropriate and the acceptable from the inappropriate and intolerable, ultimately placing autism in domains of inclusion and exclusion (see for example Kitchin, 1998; Hall and Wilton, 2017), not rarely pushing neurodivergents to try to negate, normalize, mask, or morph their natural characteristics and behaviours.

Second, the city is a huge container of sensorial stimuli and social experiences. Autism is commonly associated with different forms of sensory sensitivities and sensory-processing alterations: lights, sounds, smells, or tactile stimuli (for example walking with shoes) may be annoying, or even painful (Beale-Allis, 2017; Davidson and Henderson, 2017). Urban design can thus have a role in building more sensory-friendly cities.

Third, the city is, for many people, a therapeutic landscape made up of health services, therapies, experts, institutions, and social policies; an area for negotiating everyday rights (see, for example, Brewer, 2018; Hall, 2004), and the setting where material processes of disablement take shape. As suggested by Chouinard et al. (2010), focusing on disablement as a

process, rather than a static identity, enables us to explore the multiple ways the contemporary capitalist city and mainstream medical knowledge often disable neurodiverse minds. At the same time, the city offers multiple opportunities for empowering experiences, transformative encounters, social inclusion, and for claiming a right to neurodiverse cities.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses autobiography, the use of vignettes and the language employed in writing about autism. The paper then introduces the neurodiversity movement and crip theories, with their implications for urban identity politics. Next, a critical survey of the literature on autism and urban space in health geography and the social sciences is presented. The section entitled "Living and queering the urban" consists of vignettes based on personal experience and explores the everyday politics of negotiating urban space. Lastly, the concluding section speculates on the idea of the autistic city, advancing four tentative propositions.

On stories and language

The paper combines readings of the literature with personal experience. Autobiography is employed methodologically as a tool and practice emphasizing the role of situated forms of knowledge, subjective perceptions and interpretations, and access to emotions and commitment. By addressing questions of positionality and reflexivity, personal stories stress the partial, negotiated, processual, relational and representational nature of identities and urban experiences. They emphasize the momentary, viscous, spirited, embodied dimensions of spatially and temporally lived experience, ultimately "making sense" of the urban world (Lorimer, 2009). Stories underscore the situatedness, partiality, contingency and creativity of that sense-making by trying to capture "something real" (Vannini, 2015). Their relevance should not be measured in terms of how closely they correspond to a universal reality, as each autistic story and autistic individual is unique, and what matters here is the capacity to affect, move, and nurture ideas in a way that is integral to the thinking involved in doing and writing urban research (Rose, 2016). Using autobiographical vignettes in this paper is also part of a research strategy, as the protagonist of the stories is a nonverbal autistic person. It stresses the methodological need to develop approaches that go beyond what is or is not said, when dealing with subjects who would have difficulty communicating their experiences in interviews (Wiesel et al., 2013; Hall and Wilton, 2017).

In terms of positionality, I am an urban geographer, with no medical background. As the father of a 9-year-old autistic child, I have had many contacts with doctors, experts, caregivers, therapists, and other people in the field. My experience is geographically partial, being basically limited to my hometown, Turin (Italy). I will not present a specific case study, nor will I offer a full autobiographical account: simply, I will hybridize my experience and my situated knowledge with academic literature on autism from the social sciences (mainly literature on autism's politics and spatialities), together with non-scientific accounts and sources of information such as popular books, representations of autism in the media and discussions in blogs. On a methodological level, my exercise should be seen as a way of developing urban perspectives through, rather than *on*, popular understandings and experiences of autism. I must also stress that I am not speaking strictly "from within", or "in the name of" anyone—including my son—but I believe that living in close daily contact with autism, with years of

slowly becoming attuned to it, has given me an intimate familiarity with the subject. In this sense, I consider myself, in a way, part of the global autism community (for a similar position, see Loftis, 2019; see also Cockain, 2018). Given these premises, I will not advance broad social, political, and economic claims about autism, but will simply try to explore the horizons opened by the contact between my partial and specific experience of "autistic things" and their reverberations in cities and urban studies.

The language of autism is controversial and always in becoming. Self-advocates commonly use identity-first language, i.e., *autistic person*, instead of person-first language (a person *with autism*), as the latter suggests that autism can somehow be separated from the person, allowing the person to be seen—without autism. Put differently, it reflects a mistaken view of autism as a super-organic "thing" overlaid on genuine non-autistic bodies, whereas the opposite is true: autism is an embodied condition, inseparable from the multitude of dimensions and intersections making up personal identities and positionalities. In addition, the term *autistic* generally emphasizes an active perspective, while autism is passive. Many autistics thus view person-first language as misleading (Lawson, 2000). It can also be argued that using the label "autistic" as a shortcut for people with a diagnosis tends to subjectify them, straightforwardly and unequivocally (see the glossary section in Ellis et al., 2019). The point is that an appropriate language for autism (non-stigmatizing, empowering) has yet to be invented, as there are limits to how autism can be written or talked about (see Ryan, 2008; Loftis, 2019). Surely, any name for the public identity of neurodivergent and autistic tribes should emerge from internal processes, and not be imposed by a medical movement (Singer, 2016). In addition, the term *disability* is also problematic, and will be used sparingly in this paper. Autism is a condition that may significantly diminish the capabilities of certain individuals, but this is not always the case. For some people, autism is a resource, or an economic asset (see the discussions of the "geek syndrome" proposed by Silberman, 2001, i.e., the idea that the autistic mind fits the needs of contemporary hi-tech capitalism). Although similar considerations can also be brought into play for different disabilities (see Humphry et al., 2020; Russell and Malhotra, 2002), I will depart somewhat from the perspectives of disability studies to explore strategies of "queering autism", as a proud celebration of urban neurodiversities.

Framing autism and neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is both a political movement and a field of research exploring different ways of "being" with an untypical brain. Although the category is not limited to autism, the latter undoubtedly has the leading role in discussions (Loftis, 2019). In this paper, neurodivergence and autism are often used as synonyms, but the first category is much broader, as it includes for example Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Sensory Processing Disorders (SPDs), or dyspraxia (Kenna, 2022). The neurodiversity movement has been strongly inspired by the seminal work of sociologist Jim Sinclair (1993), tellingly entitled "Don't mourn for us". Neurodiversity theories build on feminist, queer, and critical race theories, and challenge conventional, stigmatizing and pathologizing approaches that dominate scientific debate. The edited collections by Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Chown and Stenning (2020), and by Kapp (2020), provide provocative views of autism, touching on issues such as eugenics, normativity, knowledge production, and power. Most of the ideas originate with autistic people with a high

degree of self-reflexivity. Although neurodiversity studies share several perspectives with critical disability studies (Ellis et al., 2019; see also Humphry et al., 2020), they take a distinctive approach in challenging conventional understandings of disability and questioning the power dynamics that pathologize autism, marginalize autistic scholars, and overlook social factors that produce disability. This is also enacted through *celebrations* of autism, such as those of Bascom (2015), who describes autism as a joyful condition that neurotypical people can never entirely grasp.

The neurodiversity perspective takes issue with essentialist approaches: as autism is a spectrum, people who have not been diagnosed as autistic may nevertheless have autistic traits, and may feel part of the neurodiversity movement, while the boundaries of neurodivergences are not well defined (Chapman, 2020). Neurodiversity is seen as an epistemic concept, generative of ideas, and inclusive of every form of neurological difference (Chapman, 2020; DaVanport, 2020), ultimately resisting medical definition, classification and treatments shaped by medical knowledge (Singer, 2016).

Medically, autism is defined as a developmental disorder characterized by difficulties with social interaction and communication, and by restricted and repetitive behavior, interests, and activities (for a short introduction, see Frith, 2008). The science of autism is constantly evolving, and definitions have changed over the years (Pellicano et al., 2014; Silberman, 2015). Currently, DSM-V, the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013, is widely considered the main reference in the field. For the DSM-V, autism is an all-inclusive diagnosis (merging various typologies, such as Asperger syndrome) within the broader category of "autism spectrum disorders" (see Lai et al., 2013). The category includes people who are severely limited by autism (a condition sometimes called "low functioning autism") and need extensive help in their everyday lives, as well as talented people with "successful" lifestyles. The latter is often referred to as "high functioning autism", an expression that is often criticized. Medical definitions have practical and political consequences; for example, when the DSM-V was released, many people complained about changing diagnoses and the consequences this could have on services and insurance coverage. Medical knowledge and research have increased markedly over recent decades, but there are still many grey areas. For example, there are different approaches towards treatments, and towards the very idea of "treatment": while most doctors suggest early interventions with techniques deriving from applied behavioral analysis (ABA, as discussed later), it is not rare—it happened to me—to find qualified physicians suggesting treatments based on limited scientific evidence, such as diets, drugs, mineral supplements or electric brain stimulation (tDCS). In this sense, living in contact with severe autism can turn into an ever-evolving lab, which means experimenting with solutions to everyday problems, from sleep disorders to anti-social behaviors.

The neurodiversity perspective tends to frame disability as socially constructed through barriers, negative attitudes, and exclusionary practices. This approach, which is in line with ideas from critical disability studies and from the social model of disability, questions medical frameworks which locate disability in impairments of individual bodies and seeks "cures", rather than social change (Singer, 2016). Societal barriers include a lack of suitable environments, social norms that result in misunderstandings and mistreatment, and normative expectations imposed by contemporary capitalism. Medical models assume individual

symptoms (behaviors or traits) as causes of dysfunction or disability, and prevention or cure as the main interventions. By contrast, neurodiversity approaches—without denying the importance of efforts to mitigate the negative effects of autism—focus on the intersection between individual and urban factors which produce disabilities (see Kapp, 2020). For example, Loftis (2019), who feels uncomfortable wearing shoes, describes her social negotiations in walking barefoot. Shoes, in her writing, are metaphors for neurotypical costuming, and she describes how she had to put on shoes in various circumstances, raising questions of performance and privilege, costuming, and conflicts in the contemporary city.

Neurodiversity studies share many perspectives with so-called *crip theory*, developed by Robert McRuer (2006). Crip theory is a cultural critique of normativity and obsession with bodies that sense, move, experience pleasure and work/consume in different ways. It merges queer theory (mainly the work of Judith Butler) and disability studies, emphasizing how both homosexuality and disability share a legacy of pathologizing, how ideas of "normality" and "desirability" are performed oppressively, and how rehabilitative logics can be, in a Foucauldian sense, tactics of governance and a means of producing docile bodies. McRuer's work is a call for a democratic and emancipatory politics of disability and identity, which springs from the simple consideration that "If we live long enough, disability is the one identity we will all inhabit" (McRuer, 2006, p. 200). In this sense, disability does not concern a minority, but *global bodies* in need of a cosmopolitan, urban, emancipatory post-identity politics.

Cities and autism in health and social geographies

The literature on autism from the medical and social sciences is immense. and several studies consider urban space, providing valuable accounts of how autism is (and was) conceptualized, experienced and treated, for example through public policies, therapies and different types of intervention. Major contributions in human geography and urban studies explore various kinds of "mental illness" and "intellectual disabilities", sometimes referring expressly to autism and investigating spatial processes of disablement and exclusion. This section does not present a comprehensive review of the literature. Rather, it aims to make a tentative sketch of the different lines of scientific debate.

According to the medical literature, autism does not affect spatial abilities in a specific way (Caron et al., 2004; Edgin et al., 2005; for a slightly different position, see Steele et al., 2007). However, studies implicitly consider two general spatial axes: domestic vs public space, and urban vs rural.

Regarding the first pair, there is a clear-cut separation between studies focusing on the domestic sphere and on urban public space. The first category includes analyses of how homes are transformed and organized, for example balancing containment and the opportunity to wander safely (De Wolfe, 2011; Sánchez, Vázquez and Serrano, 2011; Nagib and Williams, 2018), how therapies and educational programs are conducted at home (O'Hagan, Bond and Hebron, 2021), and how residential patterns unfold in the life course, including in non-family settings (Krauss et al., 2005).

More crucially for the aims of this paper, many studies focus on the experience of public space, meaning essentially the space "away from home". Several works, including those of autistic

authors writing "from within", describe the challenges connected with particular ways of perceiving and processing sensorial stimuli outdoors (Davidson and Henderson, 2010; Kinnaer, Baumers and Heylighen, 2015). Various papers center on the dramatic experience of meltdowns, and on the strategies for managing them enacted by people living with autism and by their caregivers (see for example Ryan, 2008 and 2010). Everyday practices such as shopping, having a pizza, going to a swimming pool, or having a walk in a park may be extremely difficult (Cockain, 2018). Parents and caregivers commonly describe feelings of embarrassment, shame and frustration (Ryan, 2010) and they deploy urban tactics which range from mimesis to disclosure, for example by dissimulating and concealing autistic meltdowns, or by disclosing autism with cards or t-shirts (Davidson and Henderson, 2010; Cockain, 2018). Meltdowns and their triggers can vary considerably; while intense noises or flashing lights are generally annoying (as they are for most people), autistic senses may be upset by specific sounds, such chewing or balloons bursting, or by fluorescent lights, but triggers are far from universal (Grapel, Cicchetti and Volkmar, 2015; Kinnaer, Baumers and Heylighen, 2016).

Meltdowns are just one of the many visible manifestations of autism in public space, which may include stimming, i.e., self-stimulatory behaviors based on repetitive movements (hand-flapping), sounds or words. A number of studies focus on experiences of "masking" and "camouflage" to cover up autistic traits and behaviors to fit neurotypical social standards, such as maintaining "appropriate" eye contact and facial expression. Masking may be enacted to increase chances of social inclusion, or to avoid bullying and ostracism, and it can be terribly exhausting and frustrating (Cook et al., 2021). Lawson (2020) suggests using the expression "adaptive morphing", rather than masking, to emphasize that the practice springs from a desire to survive and feel safe, and not from a deliberate intention to deceive or pretend.

Other papers focus on specific public spaces. Woronko and Killoran (2011) discuss the classroom environment, arguing that students' sensory needs must be considered, for instance by limiting background noises and organizing small workgroups. Madriaga (2010) explores how people with Asperger syndrome negotiate university spaces, while Cockain (2021) analyses the negotiations and challenges arising in a supermarket. Other studies deal with the neighborhood scale: Knibble and Horstman (2019), discuss hybridization strategies challenging the spatial separation of care spaces for psychiatric patients and people living with low functioning autism; Solomon and Lawlor (2013) and McLaughlin et al. (2018) address the problem of autistic "wanderings" and "elopements", and the role of professionals and local law enforcement personnel.[1]

The second pair regards the rural and urban spheres. First, statistical analyses of the distribution of autism diagnoses show controversial results: while the incidence of autism is higher in urban settings, it is difficult to determine to what degree this is due to more extended diagnosis (see for example Mazumdar et al., 2010; Lauritsen et al., 2014). Second,

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[1] It is also worth noting that spatial metaphors are commonly used to describe several aspects of the autistic condition, as in the case of "mind wandering" (Graby, 2011). For an insightful reflection on spatial metaphors and analogies, see Davidson and Henderson (2010). The word autism is commonly used metaphorically to describe (and stigmatize) lack of communication: an example in urban studies is offered by Kaika (2011) and her "autistic architectures".

opportunities to access services and therapies differ widely, as there are relatively fewer diagnoses, professionals, and service providers in rural areas (Hoogsteen and Woodgate, 2013; Hutton and Caron, 2015; Doody and Patti, 2017; Singh et al., 2018). Rural lifestyles and cultures also offer specific patterns of inclusion and exclusion, although comparative analyses are scarce (Parr, 2008, Hoogsteen and Woodgate, 2013). Studies also explore how natural environments may be both helpful and disturbing for people with specific sensorial characteristics (Larson et al., 2018; Li et al., 2019).

A large literature, at the crossroads between architecture, health studies, and the social sciences, focuses on the design of autistic-friendly urban spaces, suggesting the need to reduce stimuli (vivid colors, noises, flickering and buzzing strip lights, useless information) to promote predictability, legibility, and consistency (Segado Vázquez and Segado Torres, 2013; Davidson and Henderson, 2017; Toronyi, 2019; Tola et al., 2020; Kenna, 2022). Here, legibility echoes Lynch's (1960) classic precepts: clear spatial layouts, clear visual relations between elements, and effective use of signals and symbols. Transitional spaces and "bubbles" are also recommended (Grancich, 2014; Chan, 2018; Hall and Bates, 2019). A growing literature also focuses on new technologies, such as mobile apps facilitating mobility in the city (Koumpouros and Kafazis, 2019), or controversial GPS-based technologies for locating wandering or lost people (McLaughlin et al., 2020).[2]

Lastly, several studies explore the social dimension of urban life, and the importance of tolerance, inclusion, and openness to neurodiversity. Although autism is generally no longer considered a form of "illness", mention should be made of contributions in the field of social and cultural geography, such as those by Hester Parr and Edward Hall on mental illness and learning disability. In a series of works with other authors, they explored the ways mental illness is experienced, represented, performed, subjectified, and treated, with sensitivity towards stigmatization and with a focus on social space, community, inclusion, citizenship, identity formation, and creativity (for example Parr 1997 and 2008; Hall, 2004; Butler and Parr, 2005; Chouinard et al., 2010; Hall and Bates, 2019). Though their work occasionally employs the term autism, advocates and supporters of the neurodiversity movement criticize likening autism to mental illness or pathologies, arguing that it is a "natural human variation" (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012) and there is thus no need for a "cure", although medical interventions are welcomed as long as they improve wellbeing. Nevertheless, they share several perspectives with these contributions from social and cultural geography, particularly as regards the role of society and hegemonic cultures, as well as the disabling nature of contemporary capitalism in shaping the very meaning of neurodiversity, its experience, and the position of neurodiverse individuals in urban life.

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[2] A vast literature has explored autistic digital spaces, and the way the Internet, blogs, forums, and social media (as well as more traditional media) offer a space for the circulation of ideas and identity formation for people living with autism all over the world (see for example Davidson, 2008; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Brownlow and O'Dell, 2013; Henderson et al., 2014).

Living and queering the urban

Through personal vignettes, this section explores the relationship between urban life and autism, focusing on issues of normalization, masking, adaptation and acceptance of social norms. The rationale for this approach is to foster an understanding of urban autistic life that goes beyond the technical description of neurodiversity. Since it is quite difficult to generalize about autism, as each autistic individual is unique, the analysis is grounded in my specific experience, in the hopes of providing a vivid framework of examples, facts, stories, and urban encounters.

As the father of a neurodivergent child, it took me years to become a member of the "autistic community" (see Loftis, 2019). In the beginning, I challenged medical definitions, and was sceptical about using a single word—autism—to describe a huge spectrum of different conditions.[3] For example my son, Teo, loves to be hugged, and he is not compulsively ritual, just to mention two stereotypes about autism (see Frith, 2008). As autism has so many different manifestations, I wondered if it, as a distinct scientific category, is consistent with different factual implications in everyday life. After all, several categories have been abandoned in the history of medical science, as notably discussed by Foucault (1961).

Similar questions still exist in my mind. However, Teo clearly lives at the intersection of several identities, which are also shaped by the fact that he is commonly identified as autistic (see daVanport, 2020). His autism is visible: although one would never guess it from looking at a photo, the way he moves or stares at people manifests neurodivergence. This shapes our experience of urban space. Sometimes people ask, sometimes they guess, sometimes they say stupid things ("I am so sorry", "what a shame", or even "this child is an asshole", during a meltdown), sometimes they show their concern, and sometimes they avoid us (see Ryan, 2008). Sometimes I use spatial tactics to avoid people (see Ryan, 2010; Cockain, 2018).

Over the years, Teo engaged with several different therapies and "rehabilitative" interventions (why the suffix "re-" is used here is a mystery to me, but this is what they are commonly called, particularly in Italy), including neuro-psychomotricity therapy, speech therapy, and specific training programs such as ABA. The latter is the acronym for Applied Behavior Analysis, which is the main approach recommended for autism by scientists and experts (Chiesa, 2006). It is a behavioral engineering technique (similar to *nudging*) based on providing rewards—food, for example. Therapy is intensive (up to dozens of hours every week) and based on continuously performing and monitoring repetitive tasks. Sessions are individual, generally costly (Brewer, 2018), and in Italy only partially covered by the welfare system.

Clearly, ABA techniques are a quintessential example of efforts to govern bodies and normalize autistic behaviors, and have thus drawn criticism, particularly from neurodiversity advocates (Gruson-Wood, 2016). ABA is commonly described as the main evidence-based technique, and the way it is designed is, in fact, entirely consistent with performance and measurement technologies: ABA therapies come with hundreds of factsheets monitoring increases in skills. Teo had therapy for one year, but in the end, he started refusing, and we stopped. Teo

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[3] It is no coincidence that in a previous article I published in CITY, I wrote about Teo without employing the term autism.

currently spends his mornings at school, with special education teachers, and afternoons and weekends with his parents.

We spend a great deal of time out of the house. Teo can ride his bicycle, and we go on long jaunts around town. If he needs to relax, we follow a well-known route, crossing the city center through a pedestrian area, and reach a central square with fountains. I have thousands of pictures of Teo next to them. He loves water. During the summer, I let him strip off and get wet for a few minutes. I often notice people looking, but no one says a word. Still, what may seem at first sight a repetitive task (reaching the same square by the same route) has several minor variations (see Cockain, 2018) which I encourage as much as possible to promote flexibility and adaptability. We stop at different points. Sometimes we have ice cream in a café, sometimes a cookie in a different one. Teo is okay with these variants, which unfold in a framework of regulated predictability.

Generally, I "invent" a reason (a narrative) for going out, such as "we have to go to the supermarket and get some pasta", even if we do not really need that. Teo is more comfortable with the idea of leaving the house if he has a *mission*, rather than taking a walk for its own sake. Still, Teo's language is, sometimes, difficult to decipher, and figuring out (i.e., guessing) what he really likes requires an attunement we have developed over the years and are still developing. As a result, *I think I know* that Teo loves going out for a ride, but sometimes persuasion is needed to get him out of the house ("let's go and have an ice cream"). As a matter of fact, I use forms of nudging, although non-systematically.

When Teo looks relaxed and motivated, we also take creative, off-the-beaten-track walks. We get on buses chosen at random, we reach unfamiliar parts of the city, we find something to eat, and we go back home. Jokingly, I call these "situationist walks", because they entail forms of *dérive* requiring creativity, irony, and adaptation. Here is one of many possible examples.

One winter day, we happened to stop in front of a building, and from the entrance, we spotted a lovely internal garden. The gate was open, and Teo went in (he has little sense of private property). There was a nice fountain with a pool. The surface of the water was entirely covered with red leaves. The water looked like a solid surface. In a matter of seconds, Teo jumped into the pool, getting wet up to his knees. It was cold. We tried to get dry, but the main problem was shoes and socks. So I gave him my socks (I suspected he'd have a meltdown if he had to wear shoes without socks), putting two plastic bags (those commonly used to pick up after dogs, which I found in my pocket) over the socks, and then the wet shoes. Then, he unexpectedly asked for food (tuna fish), so we looked for that, and sat down in a car park, eating. Teo was calm. I was happy because we had handled the situation without meltdowns, and I was also proud of the idea of using plastic bags.

Once a week, we have dinner out. This can be challenging, as Teo might be disturbed by several unpredictable stimuli, like those described in the literature (noise, lights, crowds). There is the possibility that he may get nervous, scream, refuse to sit down and wait for food, and he may start annoying other customers, for example by getting too close to them, stealing fries, or spilling water all over. I imagine most people do not like to be next to us in

restaurants. Still, we keep on having dinners out to continue to experience situations. As a spatial strategy, I generally opt for marginal, cheap, and "alternative" cafés and pubs, often located on the outskirts of the city. In such places, normative gazes seem less penetrating, and we feel relaxed. Pouring water on the floor or making noise in a posh restaurant is commonly regarded as an annoyance, drawing hostile glances, causing stress, and calling for excuses or explanations. But in the very unpretentious places we love, nobody seems to care, and there seems to be no pressure to mask Teo's autism. There is a more forgiving attitude and a higher level of tolerance towards diversity, given that part of the clientele is made up of people who would be considered "out of place" in fashionable restaurants, like heavy drinkers.

I owe a lot to a pub named Manhattan, on the edge of town. There, you can eat and drink cheaply. I always loved the atmosphere. That's a place where Teo's autism sometimes becomes invisible. We sit down, we get a huge pizza, I have a couple of beers. If Teo decides to walk around in the pub, I don't care, because I think nobody will mind. Our faces are familiar, although people don't know our names. They are aware that there is something "odd" about Teo, but they don't know his diagnosis. One day, while I was at a distance, an unknown man in a wheelchair moved next to Teo and started talking to him. I came closer: he was probably drunk, and he was explaining to Teo that it is normal to use bad language when you are outraged, and that probably Teo's parents also swear. The discourse was utterly out of place, but the point is that the man didn't realize he was talking to a child with autism, unable to reply. Once he finished his long talk, Teo walked away. I told the man that yes, sometimes we swear, and I smiled at him.

Managing to have a pizza, to get on a bus, to buy tuna in a supermarket, are empowering experiences of non-domestic urban encounters, for both Teo and me. Those urban performances create *diverse* frames and narratives of reality, transcending conventional understandings of disability, subverting the boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary in our urban experiences. Somewhat wryly, I can say this is what happened the night Teo had a talk with the unknown drunk in the pub (see Cockain, 2021). These discursive reconfigurations, by departing from narratives of disability and/or integration, help me build realities and geographies that expand our world of possibilities, and renegotiate and perform our being in the city. This is consistent with a relational understanding of neurodiversity: as discussed in the literature, encounters between strangers in the city offer an opportunity for individuals to be identified in ways that are different from their more fixed identities (Wiesel et al., 2013; Hall and Wilton, 2017).

These stories open critical lines of reflection on the complex relations between autism, normalization/normativity, and urban life. This is the case of consumption and the economies of autism. On the one hand, autism is a huge industry—part of so-called *handicapitalism*: Rosenthal, 2019)—involving an array of experts, therapists, specialists, consultants, books, shows, educational materials, dietary supplements, and other commercial products and services. Accessing them can be costly, and clearly a just city must provide access to needed services, regardless of wealth. This is a complex issue, given the rising rates of people diagnosed with autism, and the limited resources devoted to welfare policies in most

countries, including Italy (see Humphry et al., 2020). We might also wonder to what extent these products, services, interventions and therapies are really empowering and useful, and which, by contrast, are the brainchildren of neurotypical minds, designed to meet their own needs, and reproducing negative and stigmatizing approaches (see Imrie and Luck, 2014).

On the other hand, some thoughts are in order about the position of people like Teo as consumers in the capitalist city. Teo is, in a way, a limited consumer. He is indifferent to ads; for example, if he steps into a toy shop, he will not ask for new things. We play with the same toys over and over again: we build small LEGO kits and take them apart for days. Teo doesn't like to go to the cinema or to have new experiences. He doesn't know what fashion is, and he loves to watch the same movies over and over. If we eat out, if we buy toys, or if we spend holidays away from home, that's because we (his parents) suggest these activities to him, hoping to "open up" his world. At the same time, we are basically training him to consume more and more. The 2016 film *Life, Animated*, by Roger Ross Williams, describes the situation well. The acclaimed movie, which won several awards, describes the touching story of Owen, an autistic boy who learned over the years to communicate and interact with the outside world thanks to Disney animations. It can be seen as a story of hope, but also as an example of normalization and celebration of Disney consumption culture. Similarly, Teo's "rehabilitation" is consistent with urban consumerism (behaving "properly" in a restaurant, in a LEGO store, or at the local marketplace). And, as mentioned earlier, people with high functioning autism are sometimes celebrated for their contributions to innovative economic sectors, for example in Silicon Valley (Silberman, 2015). Although such readings contribute to de-pathologizing and de-stigmatizing autism, they reproduce utilitarian and exclusionary perspectives, and they ultimately subsume certain forms of neurodiversity to the logics of the capitalist city.

The tension towards subsumption clashes, in my case, with the desire to *queer* our daily lives: I use the term in its original sense of "strange", without a specific sexual dimension. Queering autism, for me, means embracing the strange, the unconventional, and the inappropriate, trying not to feel out of place, and not masking or camouflaging, but enjoying our diversities. It should be borne in mind that queerness for Teo includes socially problematic behaviors, like stealing food, touching strangers, screaming in quiet places, or insisting urgently on peeing in the middle of a busy street. Luckily, Teo is not violent nor dangerous for himself and others, so I do not really *need* to regulate his relations in public space. Stealing fries is "wrong", but not that dramatic, after all. As a strategy, in certain circumstances, I let things flow, without negotiating or supervising his contact with others. I try to forget norms and codes. The fact that Teo is only 9 years old makes things easier, as people are generally tolerant because of his age and neurodivergence. This reminds me that autism unfolds in a framework of intersectionality, making each encounter and autistic experience different in the urban space.

Overall, Teo resists normalization in many ways, and although he is undoubtedly learning things about conventional behaviors in public space, he may go on stealing fries for a while. Rather than hoping for an impossible normalization and the complete subsumption of the rules of the capitalist city, I prefer to approach queerness in playful and creative ways. Perhaps, the laughable sight of Teo stealing fries without saying a word can have some transformative and progressive potential in the urban space (see Parr, 1997; Cockain, 2021). Perhaps, his way of challenging conventions can be framed as meaningful and generative, a form of resistance to the logics of everyday urban life.

The question of normalization brings us to a final line of thought: for families living with significant forms of autism, it is not rare to decide to leave the city to enact a spatial and existential strategy for living queerness far from the normativity of urban spaces.[4] For those who have adequate resources, getting out of the city and moving to relatively isolated places opens up opportunities for inventing and experimenting with different lifestyles and alternative economies, in which autistic queer behaviours are reframed. It is not difficult to find stories of brave parents, siblings, caregivers, or social entrepreneurs who have given life to situated utopias where autism is not only accepted, but celebrated, decentered, or forgotten. This is the case of care farms or various artistic or residential communities (see the case of Autreat annual retreat in Silberman, 2015). Undoubtedly, these are controversial strategies, as spatial isolation is potentially at odds with social integration, which is crucial for people who are not, and are unlikely ever to be, fully independent in their everyday life (see Hall, 2004; Hall and Wilton, 2017).

Conclusions: what would an autistic city be like?

This paper has combined a review of the academic literature with personal narratives to explore the relationship between autism, capitalism, normalization and urban life. In this conclusion, I will advance four tentative propositions for the "autistic city" (which, in a bit of wordplay, we could call an *autisticity* or *neurodiversity*). I chose the expression "autistic city", rather than other variations—"cities for autistics", for example—to challenge normative and pathologizing understandings of urban autism. Autism is not necessarily negative, and an autistic city is not inevitably a city *affected* by a problem, as the expression may suggest. With a little bit of queerness, the word "autistic" may conjure up a transformative and generative space of imagination. The four propositions offered in this section should not be seen as normative guidelines, but as tentative suggestions for a dialog in critical urban studies.

#1 – In designing an autistic city, it should be borne in mind that certain individuals need sensory stimuli— including but not limited to visual, acoustic, and olfactory stimuli—to be limited in some public spaces.

Our current knowledge of autism offers various insights for designing less sensorially toxic and more favorable urban settings. Limiting noise, artificial lighting, and aggressive colors, together with aiming for predictability and consistency, are good starting points which will probably benefit all inhabitants, and further research on neurodiverse urban experiences will bring new possibilities for designing autism-friendly spaces (Kenna, 2022). The challenge is that each autistic person is unique, and the idea of a universal autistic-friendly design must be carefully weighed (Imrie and Luck, 2014)

Thinking about sensorially diverse cities also enables us to challenge some conventional assumptions. The capitalist city, in fact, is often celebrated and branded by emphasizing ideas

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[4] For some examples, see: https://blog.theautismsite.greatergood.com/country-living; https://community.autism.org.uk/f/adults-on-the-autistic-spectrum/8938/living-in-a-rural-area; https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelbernick/2019/06/26/the-autism-city-part-1-the-intentional-community/?sh=23afa766d482. All web links mentioned in this paper have been last accessed on 7 January 2023.

of speed, productivity, the restless 24/7 economy, and the enormous concentration of opportunities that neurotypical minds have for pleasure and consumption. The autistic city offers potential for subverting this narrative, suggesting that there may be something positive about monotony, slowness, predictability, rest, and quiet—and not only for people with a diagnosis. Even boredom or loneliness can hold something worthy, useful, and creative. At the same time, neurodivergent minds may be stimulated by the urban mundane in ways that a neurotypical mind misses: the joy of taking a bus, for instance, or walking and getting wet in the rain. Potentially, this can pave the way to a radical rethinking of what is valuable and what is stressful in the urban experience, far beyond the rhetoric of the vibrant city.

#2 – An autistic city must offer fair, sustainable solutions for accessing care and providing life opportunities for everyone, including the neurodiverse.

Although this issue has been barely touched on in this paper, welfare and access to specialized services, are clearly pillars for autistic justice (see Hall, 2004; Parr, 2008). This is particularly relevant in a framework of growing austerity, where disabled people are commonly recast as worthless scroungers, and are coerced by punitive policies and penury into serving the needs of the capitalist city (Humphry et al., 2020). By considering autism as a form of (neuro)diversity and not something to be "cured", the idea of the autistic city challenges both performative and paternalistic logics of the capitalist city, smoothing the way to a whole new set of forms of care and common life. We might ask, for example, to what extent the toxic culture of performativity, hedonism and consumption characterizing the lifestyle of capitalist cities contributes to pathologizing autism and pushing autistic people to seek treatment or medication. The cultures of urban neoliberalism regard able bodies as those that fall into line with dominant notions of competence, stability, and independence. Different forms of city life, and different forms of openness towards neurodiversity, however, may reduce or change the spatial processes and the social barriers shaping the conception and experience of disability, and perhaps reduce the need for services. Different cultures and forms of city life may also allow a reframing of ideas of dependency and vulnerability, which commonly carry negative connotations, by recognizing that everyone is in some way incompetent, unstable and dependent (McRuer, 2006; Hall and Wilton, 2017).

#3 – An autistic city promotes a positive attitude of openness towards neural queerness, and all its non-violent manifestations, regardless of the labels and diagnoses attached to people.

Urban and social settings are pivotal for empowering or disabling subjects, as testified by cross-cultural analysis (for example Kim, 2012; Perepa, 2014; Ha et al., 2014). The autistic city challenges stigmatization and pietism, in favor of a positive and genuinely queer attitude towards neurodiversity. Moreover, people with a diagnosis of autism do not necessarily identify as autistic, and vice versa. Different fluid paths for subject formation, identification, and self-awareness (as well as different ontologies of disability: Hall and Wilton, 2017; Cockain, 2021) must be welcomed. This is crucial for a queer urban politics of autism encouraging multiple, creative, and joyful ways of framing neurodiversity. Urban space plays a fundamental role. For example, is it possible to think of cities that minimize autistics' need to mask and to *adapt*? Autistic cities must not be sites of perpetual negotiation or normalization, stigmatization, or social exclusion, but places acknowledging that neurodivergent individuals can bring something desirable into the world through their expression of non-normative and potentially non-capitalist embodiment (see Russell and Malhotra, 2002; Mitchel and Snyder,

2019;), including for example dealignment from the common ways of experiencing public space, relating to the human and non-human world, working or consuming, or alignment with the dominant cultures of competence and independence. This brings us to the last proposition.

#4 – An autistic city must encourage transformation, experimentation, imagination, and alternative ways of framing urban reality.

The contact with autism can subvert unquestioned assumptions about urban space, offering alternative views of cities. By walking with Teo, I have learned that streets, squares, benches, or fountains may have unplanned and unexpected meanings and functions. The ordinary may become extraordinary, and vice versa. Autism challenges urban rhythms, including the unsustainable pace of work and consumption, and unveils multiple possibilities for "doing things" differently in the city, including walking, seeing, consuming, moving, and encountering people as well as elements of the non-human world.

Over the years, cities and urban politics have been profoundly shaped by struggles and debates on the politics of difference, recognition, and intersectionality. They have informed progressive understandings of multiculturalism, gender, sexualities, and minorities in cities, to cite only a few examples. It is probably time to start questioning the politics of urban neurodiversity. In this sense, I suggest that the autistic gaze has something to offer to critical urban studies. It not only introduces questions on how to build better spaces for neurodivergents, but it shapes urban realities in ways that a neurotypical mind cannot even imagine, composing a landscape of possibilities, pleasures, problems and encounters which makes our cities more and more diverse.

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