

Interview



Smart cities, justice and local governance. An interview with Rob Kitchin

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The Institute for Urban Research recently put together an online course for city officials working with smart city policies (<https://smartcitiesforcityofficials.com/>). The course is a collage of interviews with smart city experts and wants to transfer insights from social science research about smart cities to municipal practitioners working with smart city questions on an everyday basis. Here we present excerpts of the interview we did with Rob Kitchin that deal with questions of justice and local smart city governance. Rob Kitchin is a professor of human geography at Maynooth University in Ireland and is a world-renowned smart city expert.

1 – When it comes to smart technologies, the danger of top-down management is always lurking around the corner. How can we possibly avoid that? What are the entry points we need to think of?

I think it does work at two levels. And we tend to just focus on one, which is the more instrumental, procedural, technical level, as opposed to focusing on moral philosophy engaging with ideas of citizenship, social justice, ethics of care, equity, fairness, democracy. The debate is not really in that space, the debate is around procedure, regulatory issues and compliance. When we start to talk about citizen participation, we should think about who the city is actually for, who is the smart city actually for? Is it for states and governance? Is it for companies and profit? Or is it for citizens and quality of life? That kind of larger debate is not happening.

In our interviews with civil servants and public officials about ethics, they are thinking about issues like bias, maybe some notion of consumer rights or regulation, and so on, but they are not talking about citizenship, they are not talking about social justice, they are not talking about the right to the city. And often there is a notion of civic paternalism and stewardship. They are meant to act on behalf of citizens, but citizens tend to be outside the debate. They have this kind of “general citizen” category, which is white, male, and middle class while all other groups are absent: women, people of colour, non-cissexual, disabled people, older people. These are not the figure of the citizen present in a smart city vision. On the other side, there is another group that is active, which are basically the tech bros who turn up at hackathons who are not representative of the wider population at all and fully embrace this notion of technological solutionism. And even if smart city providers have rebranded themselves as citizen-centric, what most companies or states mean by that is “citizens use the services”, as opposed to them being orientated around the citizen. It is an empty signifier that does not really mean anything. And there is a neoliberal form of citizenship in the background: this notion of choice autonomy within narrow constraints. But it is really based on your cultural capital to be able to afford the services.

I think cities themselves find it difficult to actually do things that are more citizen-centric, they do not have the resources to really do it. That is why they are geared up around citizen paternalism and stewardship. They don’t have the time and the space to really meaningfully make citizens co-creators. That has to change. If cities really wanted to do this, then they really have to put in the resources and find meaningful ways of co-creation. Otherwise, it will always just remain paternalism and stewardship and it will be

fairly tokenistic.

2- Can you tell us what you mean by the right to the smart city, the title of one of your books?

It refers to the notion of the city that is built around the interests and the values of citizens and protects things like fundamental rights around habitation, movement, voting, and a whole series of individual rights- the right to protest, the right to gather- rather than a city being organised around the interests of the state and of capital and companies and so on. And it does involve those ideas around citizenship, equity, fairness, justice, of civil liberties.

The aim of *The Right to the Smart City* was to try to frame a smart city in that way. Some people want a just smart city. My problem with that is that social justice is a contested concept. We could think about social justice in different ways. It can be distributional, which means everybody gets their fair share. It can be procedural, which means fair treatment. It can be retributive, which involves fair punishment for wrongs. Or it can be restorative, which is about righting the wrongs. Most of the time when we are talking about the just city, we mean either distributional or procedural justice. So procedural justice comes with a lot of smart city technologies, because it is about treatment, it is about service provision, it is about whether people are being treated in the same way. The way in which social justice is talked about in relation to the smart city is often very commonsensical and quite pragmatic. People just assume that everybody knows what 'justice' means. That it means that the city is organised in some kind of fair, equitable way. But if I was a libertarian, I could tell you that social justice is survival of the fittest, and people get what they deserve. And if you can't afford something, that's just right. I think what we need to do is be a lot clearer around the theory of social justice that we are advocating when we talk about a just smart city. Do we mean an egalitarian smart city that implies equality regardless of ability? Or is it utilitarian which means the greatest good for the greatest number? Or is it libertarian which implies individual autonomy, and that the free market is inherently just? Or is it contractarianism, which basically refers to some kind of consensus around what we think is just? Or is it Marxist, or feminist, or communitarian? When we say we want a just smart city, we never specify any of that, we just have some notion that it involves some level of fairness which is not articulated.

3- Would that also apply to citizen-centric smart cities?

Exactly, there are different theories of citizenship. When you say you want a smart city that is citizen-centric, my immediate question is: what is your conception of citizenship? Because that's the only way I can find out whether I agree with you or not. I don't think it has been done by academics, I don't think it's been done by cities. I don't really expect it to be done by cities, but I do think you can have conversations with city officials along these lines. I have presented this stuff to Dublin City officials. And they all agree it is something they should think about, but they are not going to, but at least it gets them to start to think about some stuff.

The answer depends on the type of city. In Dublin, for instance, although it is quite company-orientated, strongly supporting economic development, it is also a post-colonial city. I had a conversation with the city officials around surveillance. Traffic cameras in Dublin don't record any of the footage. They do not want this surveillance grid, which has partly to do with Ireland being a post-colonial country. They are just not interested in that level of security and policing because of the history of the country. So I think different places have different kind of reactions to this.

In Britain, for example, the level of surveillance and securitisation is just enormous. You would find it almost impossible to get introduced in Dublin. Nobody would vote for it, and none of the civil servants want to either. A civil servant told me, "look, we are citizens who live in this city, right? We are not going to introduce technology that is going to impinge on us". The state is not separate from the people. The state is made up by people who live and work in the city. But other places may be driven by other political pressures and corporate pressures and so on. But I do think it is useful to try and get the city official to think. When they say citizen-centric, what is it that they actually mean? We should try to get them to unpack the notion of citizen-centric, if only to make them just recognise that there are different ways of thinking about that.

4- Some years ago, you argued for a stronger cooperation between critical urban scholarship, technical researchers, cities and citizens and you criticised the critical scholars who prefer to criticise from a distance. Have you seen more meaningful cooperation?

My personal belief is that if you want to change things it is much easier to change things from the inside than the outside. So if you just externally critique people, it is very easy for them to ignore you or exclude you from the debate. If you're at the table inside the building, then you can influence what is what's going on. If you want to change how a piece of technology works, then work with the technologists, do not just critique them. What I am for is a different type of smart city. We are not going to get rid of smart technology. It is so embedded, and it is so fundamental to how things are run now. If you took the intelligent transport system out of Dublin, it would just be gridlocked. There is no point in being against that system. But maybe we can reframe, reimagine, remake those systems and how they operate, and in what domains they operate, and how and under what conditions, and how they are regulated. It is about trying to rethink the smart city as opposed to being fundamentally against it, so that means you have to be working with the technologists, and you have to be in the same space. The best way to find out how the technology works, and all the practices and politics around the technology, is to be making it, and to be at the table and to be talking to the different stakeholders and trying to nudge them into thinking about it differently. If you are critiquing from the outside, they will just swatted you away.

5- Finally: how do you think the Covid-19 pandemic will influence smart city policies?

I think the pandemic is or has been a big vehicle for these technologies. It has normalised these technologies as a means to control location and movement and to monitor them. It

has helped to legitimise surveillance capitalism because the state turned to some companies to help them to monitor people in relation to the spread of COVID-19. That has deepened the relationship between the state and companies around how some of the smart city technology is being used. And it has also given a pathway for some of these companies into health data which was pretty contained before. So, questions around how some of this infrastructure has been put into place have been moved into other domains. There are questions around whether these applications will get decommissioned. The Chinese authorities have already said that some of its movement technology won't be decommissioned. So one of the things they did in China is this QR code scanning. If you want to use public transport you would have to scan the QR code you have received, and it will tell you whether you can go. Similarly, in Moscow, you would have to pre-apply for a route. You would be given a QR code, and you would scan as you went along. And it would make sure that you had permission to move and that you were moving along the designated route. That is very strong surveillance technology.

The pandemic has actually been a pathway for introducing and normalising some technology and normalising the relationship between states and companies around legitimating some of that surveillance technology. That has implications for privacy. It deepens disciplining, and it increases state control of movement. It will be interesting to see if and to what extent it gets rolled back afterward. Several civil rights organisations such as Privacy International and the American Civil Liberties Union have been trying to push back against that kind of mobile phone apps and some of that infrastructure. Not necessarily because they were against public health, but because they wanted to ensure that rights and entitlements around privacy and around civil liberties were being protected. In the Irish case, I was part of a group campaigning around this, and the government eventually agreed that they would publish the code they used to trace people and their movements. So the Irish app is completely open-source, you can see all the code. That is one of the reasons why the Irish app has been adopted by a number of other countries because the code was open source. You could see exactly what was going on with it. And they have agreed that it will be completely discontinued when the pandemic is over. But that is not the case in authoritarian regimes.

References

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IMAGE- Steve Rotman (2008, August 30) "CCTV" [Photograph].
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/31018257@N00/10894491593>

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Rob Kitchin is a professor in the Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute and the Department of Geography. He was the principal investigator on the Programmable City project (2013–18), the Building City Dashboards project (2016–21), the Digital Repository of Ireland (2009–2017), and the All-Island Research Observatory (2005–2017). In the book, *The Right to the Smart City*, Kitchin and co-authors provide a critical reflection on whether another smart city is possible and what such a city might look like, exploring themes such as how citizens are framed within it, the ethical implications of smart city systems, and whether injustices are embedded in city systems, infrastructures, services, and their calculative practices.



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Guy Baeten is Professor of Urban Studies at Malmö University and has previously worked at the universities of Lund, Oxford, Leuven and Strathclyde. He is the PI of the VR Research Environment 'Housing as a digitalised service' together with the universities of Lund, Roskilde, Amsterdam and Hong Kong. He is the founder and current vice-Director of the Institute for Urban Research. Guy Baeten is interested in urban development projects, the housing question, and has a long-standing interest in critical approaches to urban sustainability. Guy Baeten is part of the Horizon project 'PREFIGURE – Prototypes for Addressing the Housing-Energy Nexus' that researches how citizens and neighbourhoods provide alternative housing and energy renovations in Europe. He is part of a Nordic research project (together with the Arctic University of Norway and Roskilde University) that investigates the notion of 'livability' in a Nordic urban context, and recently he finished a project on the histories of the sustainability concept in Malmö's ('Norra Sorgenfri planned, populated and problematised: the role of social sustainability in urban renewal urban planning' 2018–2021). In the recent past, he was PI of the Formas Strong Research Environment 'CRUSH – Critical Urban Sustainability Hub' that ran between 2014 and 2019 together with the universities of Lund, Uppsala and Göteborg.