

The city as a self-help book: understanding the psychology of urban promises

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Abstract

Despite the many uncertainties of life in cities, urban promises of economic prosperity, social mobility and happiness have fuelled the imagination of generations of migrants, who have flocked to the largest cities in search of a better life. While discourses celebrating the 'triumph of cities' became common in policy and media, their rewards are not available everywhere nor for everyone: both the socioeconomic outcomes and the subjective life experiences tend to compare poorly to the expectations of urban migrants. This paper uses insights from psychological literature to discuss why people have such strong, positive and apparently overrated expectations about cities. We explore the cognitive biases and heuristics affecting decision-making under uncertainty and apply them to the way individuals perceive and act upon the promises of cities. By bringing this literature to the attention of urban research, we can better understand how individuals anticipate, decide upon and evaluate their urban life stories. This understanding of urban migration departs from rational choice assumptions and can help explain the remarkable attractive force of cities throughout history. Finally, we discuss how human biases favouring narratives of bright urban futures can be exploited by 'triumphalist' accounts of cities, which neglect their embedded injustices and problems.

Keywords

Cognitive biases and heuristics, decision-making, urban migration, social mobility, subjective well-being, urban triumphalism

Word count: 9242

*"...And by the way, the man who told
That London's streets were paved with gold
Was telling dreadful porky-pies".
(That's cockney rhyming slang for lies.)
The cat went on, "To me it seems
These streets are paved with rotten dreams.
Come home, my boy, without more fuss.
This lousy town's no place for us."
(Roald Dahl, Dick Whittington and His Cat, 1989)*

1. Introduction

For centuries, people have been flocking to cities in the hope of improving their lives. Despite their changing fortunes throughout the ages, big cities have always been perceived as the places to go to for jobs, amenities, socio-economic mobility, health, personal freedom and happiness. Whatever their background, people could reinvent themselves anew by moving to the city and abandoning the social constraints of their original milieu (Yamagishi et al., 2012). There they would also enjoy the economic externalities triggered by the urban environment and step on the 'escalator' of accelerated upward mobility (Florida, 2002; Bruggmann, 2009; Glaeser, 2011). Together, all these perceived advantages build a set of expectations which we characterise as 'urban promises'.

Following decades of classic pessimistic views of cities (see a review in Prakash, 2010), recent scholarly and popular texts have celebrated again the potential of 'humanity's greatest invention' and the 'triumph' of the city, a trend aptly named 'urban triumphalism', among a variety of similar designations. This work stresses the apparent generative effects of urban spaces, able to offer a 'happier, richer, greener, smarter and healthier' life (Glaeser,

2011). But if the potential economic benefits of urban agglomeration have been documented and are accepted even by critics of Glaeser's broader claims (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015), the narrative of urban promises remains contested due to its focus on economic factors as measurement of quality of life, assumptions of urban dwellers as rational agents pursuing opportunities, and uncritical use by policymakers to justify the reduction of public intervention in cities and the neglect of urban injustices (Amin, 2013; Nicholls, 2011; Gleeson, 2012; Peck, 2016).

Indeed, there is ample evidence showing that the urban social escalator is not available everywhere, and, importantly, not for everyone. Life in cities turns out to be disappointing for many hopeful migrants, from illness, social collapse and extreme poverty in the industrial cities of the past, to congestion, un(der)employment, low-paid menial jobs, pollution, loneliness, socio-ethnic conflict and inequality in today's advanced capitalist cities (Davis, 2006; UN-Habitat, 2016; Florida, 2017). Indeed, both the objective socioeconomic outcomes and the subjective experience of urban life tend to compare poorly to the overoptimistic expectations of many urban migrants (Williams and Donald, 2011; Knight and Gunatilaka, 2010). The above average upward mobility that most new city dwellers dream of may be available to some, but many others will continue to struggle.

However, although the discrepancy between the expected and the experienced qualities of urban life is visible and enduring (Neuman, 2014), it does not seem to affect the belief by newcomers that cities will bring them a better future. This raises the question of what makes us follow 'urban promises', even in the face of opposing facts and experiences. More broadly, what explains the remarkable attractive force of cities throughout history, since the times when the *Stadtluft macht frei* motto stood for an 'escape raft from servitude' (Gleeson,

2012: 935)? Here we focus on the large cities of the Western world, which exert an attractive force over people across the globe, from the foreign migration streams coming from developing countries due to economic necessity (United Nations, 2014; Burdett and Sudjic, 2011) to the hopes of career advancement, cultural sophistication and self-realisation attracting young, educated migrants (King et al., 2017). All across this spectrum, big cities are attractive places, made even more attractive by the way information is framed and conveyed. But are urban migrants making life-changing decisions based on incomplete and biased information, in an environment saturated with positive messages about urban triumphs? And are they therefore likely to accommodate to disappointing life conditions mitigated by permanently deferred hopes and expectations?

Urban migration is often assumed as a rational choice, based on an objective assessment of costs and benefits and an informed anticipation of the future. However, this paper sees it rather as a form of decision-making under uncertainty: it is based on imperfect information, shaped by individual perceptions and values and relies on many non-economic factors. As such, it is prone to suffer from the same cognitive biases and limitations to rationality that affect all types of decision-making (Simon, 1955; Kahneman, 2011). The decision to move to a city is indeed a gamble, offering possibility but hardly any certainty of a better life. But evaluating that possibility depends more on the heuristics we use to balance beliefs and facts (Polivy and Herman, 2002) than on actual evidence.

Such an approach has influenced many disciplines, most prominently behavioural economics, but has not been sufficiently explored by urban research. ‘Behavioural urban geography’, integrating these concepts to examine the mental maps guiding the spatial dynamics of people and firms is no longer prominent among scholars (Meester and

Pellenbarg, 2006). Explanations of individual assessments stimulating urban agglomeration have shifted to rational choice models, leaving the behavioural perspective “dead and forgotten” (Meester and Pellenbarg, 2006: 365). However, these models neglect that spatial location decisions, including urban migration, are led by subjective interpretations of reality, not reality itself (Pred, 1967; Oishi, 2010; Oishi et al., 2009).

In this article, we argue that urban studies can learn from psychological literature to understand the enduring attractiveness of urban promises, as we perceive and act upon them guided by cognitive biases which affect our judgements about the future, ourselves and our environment. Therefore, we draw from literature about decision-making under uncertainty (Tversky and Kahneman, 1971, Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Kahneman, 2003) to suggest that people are likely to ‘believe’ in the promises of cities for similar reasons that they ‘believe’ in the promises of self-help books - lack of statistical intuition to evaluate risk, reliance on exceptional cases, overconfidence about themselves and their control over the environment, illusory cause-effect attributions, and rationalization of failures. These psychological aspects behind migration decision-making have received little attention in urban studies, even if scholars are aware of their importance and complexity.

While this perspective is valid for any kind of migration, we focus on urban migration, first, because of its magnitude and potential social and environmental implications. Second, because the attractiveness of the ‘urban triumphalism’ discourse, despite its fragilities, suggests that human cognitive biases offer a particularly fertile ground to spread powerful narratives about cities and dispel potentially critical judgements. Third, because it allows us to bring a behavioural approach to urban research and diversify the debates on urban migration and demographic change, which tend to be dominated by rationality assumptions.

By bringing psychological literature to the attention of urban scholars, we expose some of the current gaps in the understanding of these issues and present another way to interpret the attractiveness and the perceived benefits of cities, including their remarkable ability to retain even those people whose hopes and dreams have not been fulfilled.

We proceed by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of moving to cities, particularly in developed countries, distinguishing between different historical periods and types of migrants. We stress that these arguments apply to contexts where people have fairly reasonable options available, even if leading to different socio-economic outcomes, rather than to extreme situations across the globe where cities are an escape from hunger, war or persecution, in which case other decision-making mechanisms related to survival prevail. Then we relate the literature about the cognitive biases embedded in decision-making and future expectations to the rationale under which cities are conceived as sites of promise and prosperity. We conclude by suggesting areas of urban research and policy where the incorporation of this perspective can be productive, and comment on the implications of either exploiting our cognitive biases to fuel narratives about urban triumphs or acknowledging them to create more aware and critical participants in urban life.

2. Examining urban promises

Cities are places of inequality. Even a self-proclaimed ‘urban optimist’ like Richard Florida now concedes that the promises of cities have failed too many people and that their ‘winner-take-all’ measure of success plants the seeds of more inequality and segregation (Florida, 2017); what is more, “the larger, denser and more knowledge-intensive and tech-based a city or metro is, the more unequal it tends to be” (Florida, 2017: 82). In developed

countries, this is partly explained by the combination of the availability of high-end jobs for the most skilled workers and the high levels of competition between them (in quantity and quality) increasing the risk of failure (Behrens and Robert-Nicoud, 2014). In much of the developing world, this is aggravated by poor urban governance, derelict infrastructure and lack of legal and social protection for citizens, especially migrants (IOM, 2015). In both contexts, cities provide excessive rewards for the most able workers and privileged groups, but may be a source of disappointment for the less talented and less privileged.

While cities have historically been a magnet for people seeking safety, shelter, freedom, interaction and opportunities for social mobility, a scalar shift happened after the industrial age. In previous economic regimes, most people, even those living in towns, were bounded to specific places (by feudal relations, agriculture, or lack of connective infrastructure). Industrialisation marked the end of place-boundedness and its uneven geographic distribution caused massive migration. Following early industrialisation, Great Britain witnessed the 'urban turn' more than 165 years ago. Its early rural-urban migration has been studied in detail by Long (2005), who found that the move to urban areas was generally not triggered by famine or poverty, but by a perception of opportunities for socio-economic improvement, thereby escaping an inherited intergenerational trajectory with little promise in the countryside. This migration was selective, in the sense that urban migrants were the most skilled and entrepreneurial of the rural labour pool. As a result, those who migrated to cities fared indeed better: "On average, people from all socio-economic strata who moved to the city were substantially more successful in improving their socio-economic status than they would have been had they remained in rural areas" (Long, 2005: 29).

And yet, Long's statistics also show that the chances of downward mobility were substantial. Furthermore, his statistics are limited to those who managed to survive the 30-year period between the 1851 and 1881 censuses, which he used for comparison. The reality was that urban mortality rates were up to 50% higher than in rural areas, and urban life expectancy was estimated to be about 10 years lower, and even worse in the largest cities, which kept growing only because of massive inward migration (Higgs, 1973; Haines, 2001). This state of affairs persisted until the 1930s. The costs of living in cities were high, as famously illustrated by Friedrich Engels, describing Manchester's squalor as 'hell upon earth'. But while social scientists and activists campaigned to mitigate the dreadful problems of urban living (Hall, 2002), stressing the economic opportunity argument was in the interest of an urban elite – e.g. factory owners – who fuelled the narrative of promise to attract more labour force (Ross, 2011). The emerging picture is one of stark contrast between the economic opportunity offered by cities to some, and the negative social and health impacts that made the urban experience troublesome for many.

2.1 Escalators up... and down (and with limited capacity)

The upward mobility effect of moving to cities is known today as the 'escalator effect', and 'escalator regions' (Fielding, 1992) are those regions that propel careers of migrants upward, with the associated benefit of higher wages, leading to a higher socio-economic status on which they capitalise when moving out of cities again. There is evidence of a beneficial impact on wages of moving into cities, although partially offset by higher living costs (Glaeser and Maré, 2001). This wage premium also relates to the fact that people with higher skills, rich in human capital, tend to sort into big cities, a cohort that would have

experienced a rapid increase in income or occupational attainment in the first years anyway (van Ham, 2001; van Ham et al., 2012). But the implication is that these talented migrants may advance faster in an urban environment that lets them develop their human and social capital, by having access to learning opportunities, acquiring tacit knowledge and frequently changing jobs, enabling even more and more diversified tacit knowledge.

However, Gordon (2015) emphasizes that this is not an ‘effortless ride up’: ambition and learning skills are key intermediating variables determining whether one exploits the potential gains of being in an escalator region. Moreover, a large part of urban migration to western cities comes from abroad, in which case other hurdles exist, even for the young and educated: language and barriers in access to employment lead to initial jobs well below their skill level and allow a relatively slow progression (Parutis, 2011).

While there is a tendency to associate the wealth of socioeconomic opportunities with the largest cities, recent research focusing on longer-term prospects contests this link. Chetty et al. (2014) mapped the detailed geography of intergenerational mobility in the United States, based on the odds of a child reaching (as an adult) the top quintile of the national income distribution starting from a family in the bottom quintile. The results are extremely varied and the authors explore correlated factors, such as residential segregation, income inequality, quality of schools, social capital and family stability. On average, “urban areas tend to exhibit lower levels of intergenerational mobility than rural areas” (Chetty et al., 2014: 1593). To complement these findings, and using their data, we focused only on urban areas (based on population data of all 381 Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the US) and looked for correlations between absolute upward mobility and urban size (see Chetty et al., 2014, for the definition of absolute mobility and other technical aspects; online datasets

by Metropolitan Statistical Area and other subdivisions are available at <http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/data/>). We found that there is no positive correlation between greater odds of intergenerational mobility and larger cities, meaning that size does not contribute to greater (long-term) economic opportunity for families.

Interestingly, that dataset also shows no positive correlation between greater odds of intergenerational mobility and recent population changes (based on US Census 2000-2010 data), meaning that people are not necessarily migrating to the places where socioeconomic opportunities (for their children) are better. Indeed, motives for migration vary, and hard economic factors are not only filtered by individual perceptions, but are also intertwined with non-economic factors, such as family contexts, amenities, lifestyle choices and housing needs, which are equally or even more important (Clark and Maas, 2015; Van Ham, 2002). With different personal characteristics, migration motivations, time frame of goals, and levels of human capital playing a role in the returns offered to urban migration, it follows that the urban escalator has limited capacity and is often inaccessible. Furthermore, it cannot be found everywhere: only a select class of metropolitan areas seems to function as an escalator region (Newbold and Brown, 2012; Champion et al., 2014).

2.2 Towards a fuller account of urban living

The quality of life in cities has improved considerably over the past decades, certainly in developed countries. According to some ‘urban triumph’ literature, technological progress and rational economic principles have solved most of the typical urban problems of the past (e.g. Bruggmann, 2009). But other problems persist. Research has shown that inhabitants of large cities experience more traffic congestion (Broersma and Van Dijk, 2008), pollution

(Burgalassi and Luzzati, 2015), are more exposed to infectious diseases (Alirol et al., 2011) and suffer greater social isolation and loneliness (Scharf and De Jong Gierveld, 2008).

Foreign-born urban migrants may additionally experience exclusion and social vulnerability. The World Migration Report states that “migrants, and in particular recent migrants, [...] tend to be disproportionately represented among the poor and vulnerable of urban populations in both developed and developing countries.” (IOM, 2015: 79). Many urban promises of long-term and improved well-being quickly have to be traded-off against immediate basic needs. This is not limited to fast-growing cities in low or middle-income countries: Eurostat statistics (2017) show that foreign urban migrants in the EU are more likely than natives to live in overcrowded lodgings and to be overburdened by housing costs. OECD (2016) data for Sweden show that employment rates of foreign-born migrants are much lower than natives at all skill levels, partly because the largest cities with more work opportunities also face housing shortages and affordability crises, which affect migrants to a greater degree. These agglomeration costs tend to be poorly anticipated when making a residential location decision, but may offset the benefits of living in cities.

To capture the full life experience in cities beyond economic factors, attention has recently shifted to personal well-being as a ‘net’ indicator, capturing the balance between the benefits and costs of urban living more directly. Subjective well-being can be defined as an overall appreciation of life as-a-whole (Veenhoven, 2000), commonly measured by asking people how happy or satisfied they are with their life. There is some consensus that the determinants of life satisfaction can be largely explained by genetic factors and personality traits (Layard, 2005; Veenhoven, 2010). However, individual socioeconomic

characteristics (health, social relationships, marital status, income, employment) and environmental factors, such as the quality of the living environment, also play a role.

But do urbanites lead better lives than residents of the countryside? Although residents of cities in the developing world report higher levels of subjective well-being than their rural counterparts (Glaeser et al., 2016), this does not apply to countries in the developed world. On average, residents of large cities in Western Europe and North America report lower subjective well-being scores than residents of smaller cities and rural areas, despite greater material well-being (Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Lenzi and Perucca, 2014). The benefits of living in cities are often outweighed by their associated monetary and non-monetary costs, but the low subjective well-being scores of residents of larger cities can also be explained by a selection bias of unhappy people moving to cities: people looking for a better life, but who already reported low levels of subjective well-being before and whose life satisfaction does not improve after moving (Hoogerbrugge and Burger, 2017).

2.3 The fragilities of the urban triumph

The discussion above suggests that evidence about the overall benefits of moving to, and living in cities is mixed at best. But any historical overview of the rapid growth of the largest cities shows a very different perception. Cities were indeed experienced as dirty, crowded and poor, but also expected to be rich in opportunity (Williams and Donald, 2011). In this perceptual gap between *expected* and *experienced* lies the strength of urban promises, but, in a context biased towards positive accounts of cities, also their pitfalls: inequality, exclusion, low sense of well-being and loss of social bonds are some of the neglected downsides of urban life. We can thus justify the need for a behavioural approach

to better understand the success of the urban triumphalist discourse, but also to critically mediate its claims, starting by summarising its fragilities:

- First, it neglects that, even if life situations in cities improve in purely economic terms, there are other objective and subjective factors contributing to quality of life whose association with urban environments is questionable or negative.
- Second, it implicitly relies on rational choice models, assuming people as intelligent, informed and unconstrained agents rationally pursuing opportunities, neglecting that individual perceptions filter and transform information, and devaluating the impact of the socioeconomic and spatial injustices present from the start in cities and regions (Peck, 2016; Graham and Marvin, 2001).
- Third, it is often uncritically captured by policymakers to adopt urban governance styles aimed at reducing public intervention and collective responsibility. Within the narrative that there is potential opportunity for all, existing inequalities become more acceptable (Engelhardt and Wagener, 2014), clusters of urban poverty are repackaged as sites of 'creativity and resilience', and the neglect of spatial-economic injustices is justified as space for 'bottom-up empowerment' (Amin, 2013). In parallel, urban success stories, from self-made entrepreneurs starting from garages to poor immigrants who 'made it' in the city, become media favourites, fuelling our tendency to trust salient information regardless of its representativeness.

3. Understanding the psychology of urban promises

The powerful attractive force of cities and of their associated rhetoric is based not only on what cities can actually offer but also on what people *believe* they can offer. As many

psychological studies have shown, most decisions in life are made indeed according to the latter (Kahneman, 2011). In complex perceptual environments, the fact that outcomes do not mirror initial expectations is unremarkable, and in most situations of daily life such discrepancies may go unnoticed. What turns the case of urban promises into more than a trivial matter is that it seems to be an especially strong manifestation of this phenomenon, in its persistency throughout history, geographical scope and impact on human life.

3.1 Cognitive biases and the attractiveness of the uncertain

To understand the mental processes through which urban promises are perceived and acted upon by individuals, we build on theories about decision-making under uncertainty, pioneered by Herbert Simon, Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, and others. These authors expand the notion of bounded rationality (Simon, 1955), meaning that, depending on the tractability of the problem and imponderability of the future, humans are neither capable of optimal (rational) decision-making, nor of optimal assessment of themselves and others. This is revealed by several biases, which, for the purposes of our argument, we organise in two categories: unrealistic perceptions of risk, the self and the environment, and rationalizations of failure. We will refer to the biases emerging from these categories, illustrate them from the perspective of urban promises, and then go over the ways in which they can be advertently or inadvertently induced. Figure 1 presents a scheme of the relevant cognitive mechanisms.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Unrealistic perceptions of risk, environment and the self

Unrealistic expectations and poor perception of risk often conflate to influence decisions in a variety of areas. For instance, Simon, Houghton and Aquino (2000) have demonstrated that what drives so many individuals to start business ventures with little chances of success (the so-called 'entrepreneurs') is not their propensity to accept high risks but their lack of perception of risk. At the initial stages, they base their decisions on the 'law of small numbers' (Tversky and Kahneman, 1971; Taylor and Brown, 1988; Kahneman, 2003), a tendency to fallaciously generalize from sparse data and to be insensitive to sample size – we tend to find patterns and stories, especially those that confirm our desires, in very small samples, neglecting randomness and representativeness.

If migration to cities is similarly seen as a life-changing venture of uncertain outcome, the adherence to that endeavour is also likely to be explained by a law of small numbers: an anecdote about a distant acquaintance who achieved success after moving to the city may be enough to send us down the same path, in an expanded version of chain migration not restricted to family and close friends (MacDonald and MacDonald, 1964). Taleb (2005) has pointed out our 'survivorship bias', the tendency to select the stories of winners to inspire our actions but disregard the vast amount of losers. Narratives about urban triumphs cherry-pick such stories with "no particular care for audit by numbers" (Amin, 2013:480).

The poor measurement of risk coming from this weak statistical intuition coexists with a tendency for overconfidence, which relies on two further biases: the illusion of control and overly positive self-assessments. Simon, Houghton and Aquino (2000) also argue that individuals venturing into business assume they have much greater control over their environment than they actually do, neglecting the role of chance and the impact of

unexpected events (Taylor and Brown, 1988; see also the now popular Black Swan concept, proposed by Taleb, 2007). The illusion of control adds causality to random events and retrospectively explains outcomes by reconstructing the actions which apparently led to them, overestimating the instrumental role of agents (Miller and Ross, 1975) or fetishizing the effect of a specific event which they believe to control. According to McGee (2005), the latter contributes to the success of self-help books: readers who achieved a desired outcome reconstruct the choices they made in such a way that they can attribute their success to their actions in response to the message of the book, thus justifying their investment.

Similarly, in an environment saturated with positive messages about urban opportunity and individual empowerment, it is easy to reconstruct past or ongoing life stories to reflect the illusion of control over external events, and recognize causalities that confirm the 'natural powers' of cities to improve our lives – another form of spatial fetishism. Structural forces emanating from the spatial opportunity structure of cities (Galster and Killen, 1995) are thus outweighed, assuming our ability to control them in our favour, while the uneven distribution of personal skills, willpower and social safety nets, or simple luck, are neglected. This is quite similar to the rhetoric of much of the urban triumphalism discourse, suggesting that the illusion of control bias may partly support its attractiveness and penetration.

The overly optimistic self-assessment bias plays a role in this imbalance. Surveys show that *most* people believe they have better qualities and future prospects than *most* other people, a tendency known as the 'better-than-average' effect (Alicke and Govorun, 2005). Despite the logical inconsistency of these assessments, they are seen by some as adaptive strategies that improve mental health, strengthening motivation and protecting us from pessimism (Taylor and Brown, 1988). Later, the perception of outcomes confirms the initial

expectations: Engelhard and Wagener (2014) have studied the gaps between actual and perceived upward mobility in 24 developed countries, in terms of job status and material well-being, to find that perceived mobility is much higher than reality in every case. Surveys by Hagerty (2003) also stress this positive bias: *most* people believe their lives have improved over time, but think that the life of the *average* person has not (Hagerty, 2003). As to the potential benefits of urban migration, this means that the urban escalator may be only available for some, but everyone tends to believe it *will include* or *has included* them.

The overestimation of the likelihood of success in spite of contrary signals follows the ‘smoke detector’ principle, which posits that the cost of responding to a false alarm is low in comparison with the cost of not acting on a real threat. Haselton and Nettle (2006) explain that if the cost of failure is low compared to the cost of missing a real opportunity of gain, people taking decisions under uncertainty will embark on potentially promising endeavours even if the chances of success are low. Overoptimistic perceptions may therefore lead to rational options in terms of costs and benefits. However, they also introduce great unreliability in the self-reporting of life situations, as seen above.

If the attractiveness of cities can be framed partly as a consequence of overly optimistic self-assessments, then we should consider whether something akin to this smoke detector principle also applies there: is the cost of failure low in comparison with the potential opportunity? How much does the sheer increase of competitive actors and the unevenness of the playing field affect the level of opportunity? Despite the popularization of overly optimistic views, the discussion in the previous sections stresses that these questions are far from settled: upward mobility is only attained by some, while the embedded costs of urban life cannot be avoided by most. People are right about the unmatched opportunity of cities,

but poor perception of risk, overconfidence and the illusion of control might make them disregard the unrelenting competition and injustice that comes with it.

Rationalizations of failure

The costs of failure are difficult to measure because they are often rationalized in a self-illusory way, to protect self-esteem and motivate us to try again (Polivy and Herman, 2002). The associated cognitive bias is known as sunk-cost fallacy, or escalation of commitment. Several competing theories explain it (see a review in Brockner, 1992; also Kahneman, 2011), but the basic idea is that people are unwilling to change a course of action if they have already invested substantial resources in it (financial, emotional, time), either due to the need of self-justification or to the anticipation of substantial losses. Therefore, overly ambitious purposes demand overly ambitious investments, becoming simultaneously more difficult to attain and less likely to be abandoned. The rationalization of failure in such situations – often shifting responsibility to external events – serves as a motivation to insist and keep the commitment going.

Similarly, the great promises of cities, as shaped collectively by successive generations of migrants, make them seem more attractive than an unbiased account of the realities of urban life. But the greater the magnitude of these promises, the more unattainable they become for most, thus making people likely to rationalize the failure and try again: failures are more prone to escalate commitment and retain people in a cycle of motivation and frustration as they keep trying, than to make them abandon their investment.

Can this process be behind the visible capacity of cities not only to attract many people, but also to retain those who were left at the lower steps of the urban escalator? Haartsen and

Thissen (2014: 89) write that the alternative, return migration, is often perceived as failure, and “because they failed in the destination, failure returnees are thought to have inferior human and social capital and will therefore not be able to have any (positive) impact on the development of the region of origin”. Although many returns are planned and socially well-regarded, and non-economic motives such as family and friends play an important role, there is evidence for such a negative selection bias in return migration, namely when purely economic factors are considered (Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011). In those cases, those who do not manage to step up the escalator but stay and insist, even if objectively worse off, keep their condition hidden from social disdain and can hope for their own lucky moment.

3.2 (Self-)inducing cognitive biases

Psychologists and behavioural economists see the biases of poor perception of risk, illusions of control, overly optimistic self-assessments, and rationalization of failure as design features of human cognition rather than flaws that can be corrected (Haselton and Nettle, 2006). However, Kahneman (2011) argues that we can mitigate the negative consequences of these cognitive limitations by becoming more aware of the ways in which they can be induced and exploited. We will refer to three main ‘cognitive shortcuts’ used as heuristics to support decision-making: framing, the way that gains and losses are presented; accessibility, the ease with which thoughts are recalled; and focusing illusions, the errors in judging the weight of especially visible distinctions. All of them can be recognized, explicitly or implicitly, in many current understandings of cities.

Framing

Framing effects (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981; Kahneman, 2003) violate the rationalist assumption that the addition of irrelevant features or outcome differences does not affect decision-making. In fact, logically equivalent assertions result in very different perceptions depending on how they are presented (a treatment presented as having a 10% mortality rate is likely to be less favoured than one with 90% survival rate; see Kahneman, 2003). This not only lets individuals construct their own narratives about urban promises to better confirm their desires and beliefs, but also allows city authorities and opinion-makers to frame information in different ways according to the effect they wish to create. For instance, investment agencies highlight the numbers that show the positives of their cities, but not those that may reveal negative features; municipalities frame phenomena of gentrification as ‘regeneration’ to create a positive response in visitors and investors. Leaving aside the discussion about supporting evidence, see how Glaeser (2011) *reframes* the problem of concentrated urban poverty by stating that cities are ‘good places to be poor’ (Peck, 2016) and thus attract more poor people. Amin adds that many popular urban imaginaries reframe slums as “another kind of creative/resilient Schumpeterian space” (Amin, 2013: 479), full of opportunity and empowerment, while implicitly endorsing the neglect of public intervention in the city. Researchers assessing the successful performance of cities or the outcome of policies must consider the potential framing effects distorting their datasets.

Accessibility

Urban imaginaries often rely on very rich descriptions, full of visually striking images and memorable concepts. From the first suburbs and Garden Cities to the urban

regeneration projects of today, developers advertise their new ventures with detailed imagery and descriptions to trigger strong reactions and easily recallable memories. The reason why they do this illustrates the phenomenon of accessibility: when confronted with a question about which we do not have sufficient information – e.g. how will life in the city be like? - we tend to replace it with a secondary question to which we can respond easily – e.g. do I feel attracted to this image? (Kahneman, 2011). In decision-making, the ease of recollection and salience of the data is more important than its statistical representativeness and validity (recall the law of small numbers).

The capacity to surprise, alter moods and evoke familiar stereotypes are attributes that enhance accessibility (Higgins, 1996; Kahneman, 2003). Therefore, rhetorically effective discourses about the promises of cities, rich in imagery and resorting to specific anecdotes, are likely to override other, eventually more balanced, sources of information. To be fair, the reliance on accessibility works both ways, as the literature about the negative side of urban life, which occupied part of the twentieth century, resorted perhaps even more to highly recallable and strong imagery about dystopia, disease and conflict to make its points.

Focusing illusions

A memorable illustration of the final bias, the focusing illusion, involves precisely the perceived distinction between two spatial locations, which relates nicely to our argument about how people judge the promises of urban life. Schkade and Kahneman (1998) compared how people living in the Midwest (USA) judged their own life satisfaction and that of people living in California, and vice versa. While the average results were similar in both places, Midwesterners assumed that life satisfaction in California was much higher,

based on the better weather as a highly salient distinction, which they overweighed relative to the rest. The authors write that the correlation between subjective well-being factors and objective life circumstances is very low, but “judgements of life satisfaction in a different location are susceptible to a focusing illusion: easily observed and distinctive differences between locations are given more weight in such judgements than they will have in reality” (Schkade and Kahneman, 1998: 340); under this perception, people might actually move to California “in the mistaken belief that this would make them happier” (ibid.: 345).

While the weather is only one factor, and perhaps not particularly important, what counts is how much it sets a *difference* from the present situation of the observer. Messages highlighting very salient distinctions between alternative places, or alternative lifestyles (the premise of many self-help books), can exploit the focusing illusion and induce life-changing decisions. Urban promises strive on such illusions: visible differences between large cities and the original settings of migrants – whether they focus on access to amenities and infrastructure, finding potential love partners, or enjoying the cultural milieu – will be greatly overweighed as to their potential for change and role in future life satisfaction. The greater the difference, the greater the error of judgement, meaning that the focusing illusion is more likely to affect people choosing between very distinct environments (say London and a village in Southern Italy), than opting between two more similar places.

The point that what counts is not the actual factor of satisfaction but the change it implies in comparison with current conditions is important to show that the cognitive biases affecting decision-making can produce similar discrepancies between expectations and outcomes across all types of social groups. As discussed, there is a whole spectrum of urban migrants, from underprivileged populations going to cities in search of a better life to skilled

professionals looking for the next career move. But, aside from situations of absolute *need* to migrate, whatever the odds, the differences in the mental processes used by these different people to perceive and act upon urban promises may be in degree rather than in nature.

Indeed, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) developed their prospect theory around the notion that the actual carriers of utility are not expected states of wealth but the potential gains and losses *in relation to a point of reference*. This reference dependence is essential to understand that people in all kinds of initial states may fall for the same type of judgement errors and similarly overrate the promises of cities. Nevertheless, qualified professionals are likely to have more concrete expectations, such as education or a new job, while for underprivileged people the move to the city may be much more clouded with uncertainty about the future, adding difficulty and undermining the clarity of their decisions.

4. Conclusions

This paper used insights from psychological literature to better understand why people tend to have such strong, positive and often overrated expectations about cities, even in the face of contradicting facts and experiences. It discussed urban migration as a form of decision-making under uncertainty rather than a rational choice, and aimed to explore how the psychological mechanisms affecting the former apply to the way we understand and act upon urban promises. In parallel, the paper aimed to elucidate some of the reasons for the attractiveness of the ‘urban triumphalism’ discourse and provide further directions for its critique. More broadly, we argued the importance of a behavioural approach to urban studies to diversify the current debates around migration and urban agglomeration.

Indeed, urban promises have fuelled the imaginations of generations of hopeful migrants, who have often exaggerated the potential benefits and neglected the drawbacks of cities. The way this tendency has endured throughout history, in many different contexts, makes an explanation deeply embedded in the human psyche quite likely. Therefore, we explored the discrepancy between the *expected* and the *experienced* life in cities through notions of bounded rationality when anticipating the future, rather than assuming the prevalence of rational behaviours and choices.

A first implication of the discussion is that alongside the gap between the expected and the experienced, we must consider another gap between the experienced and the perceived. Even in presence of results, we tend to misrepresent and overrate our successes, meaning that individual idiosyncrasies, contexts and values decisively distort not only the future expectations but also the perceived outcomes of urban life. This overoptimistic assessment even applies to apparently 'objective' factors, like economic mobility, and, especially in large and diverse urban agglomerations, where opportunities are diffuse and possibilities unclear, makes individuals more likely to accommodate to disappointing but misperceived life conditions (Engelhardt and Wagener, 2014).

We paid attention to several biases present in decision-making and provided links with relevant urban research concerns: (1) the poor perception of risk (law of small numbers) explaining the somewhat overindulgent view of the value of previous urban migration successes; (2) the illusion of control over the environment providing fertile ground for the rhetoric of urban triumphalism and the belief in the 'natural powers' of cities (Gleeson, 2012); (3) the overoptimistic self-assessment inducing trust in the urban escalator and the neglect of playing fields tilted by embedded injustice and relentless competition; and (4) the

escalation of commitment as a factor for the ability of cities to retain even those to whom urban life was not yet generous.

All these biases feature prominently in how we anticipate and perceive life in cities. They can be strengthened by a variety of heuristics, or sub-optimal cognitive shortcuts. We considered framing and accessibility as common strategies to convey positive messages about urban life and dispel its downsides; and we also described how focusing illusions do not look at absolute outcomes but always relate to a point of reference, meaning that the tendency to overrate the value of the potential changes to one's current situation may affect all kinds of socioeconomic groups.

However, the levels of risk coming from uncertainty and the potential impact of wrong decisions are due to change significantly between more and less privileged migrant groups, implying more attention to how these embedded features of cognition can be purposefully exploited by techniques of manipulation of information and affect the most vulnerable. Indeed, when it comes to the promised triumph of the urban, we should be aware of self-help-book-styled, 'miracle cures' promised by city marketing gurus (Storper and Manville, 2006). The analogy with self-help books is important here, because the logic behind them is often dangerous – they provide immoderate hopes, neglect that choice sets are severely limited, and spread the idea that being poor, unsuccessful, unattractive or depressed is one's own responsibility and can be changed by one's own reinvention (McGee, 2005).

While we do not claim that there is an organised 'industry' selling urban promises to the masses akin to the 'self-help book industry' (Salerno, 2006), much contemporary urban policy does frame the devaluation of public intervention as a 'bottom-up' empowerment of citizens (Amin, 2013), similarly seen as rational, resourceful and free from social constraints.

Research in the United States shows that especially the poorest individuals are indeed willing to accept vast amounts of inequality, as long as they *believe* in the opportunity to succeed, overestimating the likelihood of upward mobility against the risk of downward mobility (Davidai and Gilovich, 2015). The exploitation of this perception is patent in the futurology of some city-marketing experts and urban triumphalists, announcing the natural powers of the urban to make us *all* happier, wealthier and healthier (Gleeson, 2012). Highlighting the biases through which we perceive the world may help to tone down some of these celebratory, but paralysing narratives that have spread to policymaking and media.

These links between urban studies and psychology have received little attention from existing research (although studies about the psychological impacts of urban spaces, for instance, are fairly common in urban studies and environmental psychology journals). Since the heyday of behavioural approaches to urban geography (Pred, 1967; Meester and Pellenbarg, 2006), people and their inconsistent behaviours have been systematically left out of conventional explanations of urban agglomeration, often captured by urban economists of the rationalist tradition. However, the perspectives offered by psychology provide promising paths for a research agenda that aims to privilege people alongside firms and institutions as agents of urbanisation, tries to explain rather than be blind to inconsistencies, and hopes to offer policy-relevant results. Research paths include empirically testing the discrepancies between expected, experienced and perceived outcomes of urban life, how they change in time and how they vary across different types of urban migrants (age, skill, geographical context, etc.). This can be achieved both by qualitative, in-depth interviews, as well as by longitudinal studies of large datasets to verify causal effects.

The positive aspects of cities should not be downplayed. Cities have been indeed engines of socio-economic mobility, personal freedom, social and technological innovation and quality of life. Agglomeration benefits are evident and people looking for greater life opportunities are right to consider moving to larger cities. Advertising the positives of cities, believing in unlikely promises and following uncertain paths may even have productive effects, as they reinforce motivation and help overcome our reluctance to change due to loss aversion (Berliant, 2010). However, the question of how the ‘comparative advantage’ of cities emerges must be asked. Two possibilities emerge: one, there can be actors with an incentive to present cities as more attractive than they actually are (resorting to framing techniques, for instance). The second option is that there is a systematic information asymmetry, related to the scale of cities and the density of stories and events that take place in cities, which gradually develops into a commonly accepted form of spatial fetishism – things are not just *in* the city, they become *of* the city (Saunders, 1986). This process shifts the focus from purposeful framing to the accessibility and focusing illusion heuristics (e.g. positive stories will have greater salience, regardless of representativeness; potential changes are excessively valued), which unfold in our minds regardless of explicit intentions.

Clearly, framing techniques are present in current urban policy discourses, and the positive accounts of urban life often amount to uncritical narratives about maximizing economic opportunities, which obscure the forces tilting the urban playing field. However, considering the historical persistency of the ‘urban promises’ phenomenon, the second possibility seems likely: rather than organized actors with an incentive to sell the wonders of city life, there are features of human cognition that process information asymmetrically and provide a comparative advantage to the urban narrative. The question then is to make

people more aware of these features so that they are able to critically judge the benefits and costs of urban life, avoid one-sided or biased discourses, and make more informed decisions about their future. Bright city lights can dazzle as well as illuminate, and when it comes to developing policies that improve urban conditions for a majority of people, the belief in better urban futures should not be appropriated as a pretext to perpetuate spatial and socio-economic injustices.

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