DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

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ABSTRACT

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Despite the many negative aspects of life in cities, urban promises of economic prosperity, freedom and happiness have fuelled the imagination of generations of migrants, who have flocked to cities in search of a better life, invariably exaggerating the opportunities and neglected the potential disadvantages of their choice. This paper uses insights from psychological literature to better understand why people have such strong, positive and apparently overrated expectations about cities. We dwell into concepts of bounded rationality to describe the cognitive biases and heuristics affecting decision-making under uncertainty and apply them to the way individuals perceive and act upon the promises of urban life. By linking this literature to urban theory, we can better understand how individuals make their decisions about moving to and living in cities. We thereby offer an understanding of urbanisation and migration processes departing from economic rationality assumptions and explain the remarkable attractive force of cities throughout human history. Finally, we discuss the ways in which human biases in favour of city narratives and bright urban futures can be exploited by 'triumphalist' accounts of cities in policy and media, which neglect the embedded injustices and structural problems of urban life.

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"...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, cities have always been perceived as the places to go to for jobs, socio-economic mobility, health, personal freedom and happiness. Whatever their background, people hoped to reinvent themselves anew by moving to the city. There they would enjoy the economic externalities triggered by the urban milieu and step on the 'escalator' of accelerated social mobility (Jacobs, 1969; Florida, 2002; Brugmann, 2009; Glaeser, 2011). Following decades of classic pessimistic views of cities (Mumford, 1961; see a review in Prakash, 2010), recent scholarly and popular texts have celebrated again the promises of 'humanity's greatest invention' and the triumph of the city, a trend aptly named 'urban triumphalism', among a variety of related designations (see critiques in Nicholls, 2011; Gleeson, 2012; Peck, 2016).

However, there is ample evidence showing that the social escalator of cities 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; Amin, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2016). The above average socio-economic mobility that most new city dwellers dream of will happen – by definition - to a minority, while the others will continue to struggle. The fact that not *everyone* can experience above average improvements in their life circumstances is something that we can intuitively infer without much analysis as the result of simple mathematics. In the western world, cities are indeed the loci of inequality, partly explained by the combination of the availability of high-end jobs for the most skilled workers and high levels of competition between workers (in terms of quantity and quality) increasing the risk of failure (Behrens and Robert-Nicoud, 2014). Hence, cities provide excessive rewards for the most able workers but seem to be a source of disappointment for the less talented.

If this is relatively well-known, and has been experienced by millions, then why do 'urban promises' exert such an attractive force over people across the world (United Nations, 2014; Burdett and Sudjic, 2007; 2011)? How is it that an uncertain hope of personal reinvention and social mobility becomes convincing for so many? Research shows that even if staying in the countryside seems less attractive for prospective

migrants, there tends to be great discrepancy between the high expectations and the actual experience of moving to cities (Knight and Gunatilaka, 2010), both in terms of actual socio-economic mobility and more subjective factors, such as happiness. The fact that this phenomenon remained consistent in different historical periods and geographical locations, affecting so many people and leading to life-changing decisions, makes the question of why people have such strong, positive and apparently overrated expectations about cities relevant for urban studies.

In this article, we suggest that urban studies can learn from the psychological literature to understand this discrepancy and explain the enduring attractiveness of the urban narrative. The decision to move to a city is partly a gamble, offering possibility but hardly any certainty of a better life (IOM, 2015). However, humans experience cognitive biases that turn the *matter of fact* that eventual success requires trial and error and hard work into the *belief* that hard work will guarantee success (Polivy and Herman, 2002). We thereby argue that people 'believe' in the promises of cities for similar reasons that they 'believe' in self-help books – lack of statistical intuition to evaluate risk, reliance on exceptional cases, overconfidence about themselves and their environment, illusory cause-effect attributions, and rationalization of failures. These features of cognition are some of the heuristics and biases affecting decision-making under uncertainty (Kahneman, 2003; 2011).

This paper contributes to urban theory, by linking it with psychological literature and presenting ways forward for research to understand the attractiveness of moving to cities and the perceived benefits of urban life, thereby providing novel explanations for the processes of demographic change and migration. Furthermore, it offers a new way to historically interpret the remarkable attractive force of cities and their ability to retain even those people whose hopes and dreams have not been fulfilled. The paper follows recent arguments for the integration of preference and choice theories into urban research, to explain both the success and failure of specific cities and make urban theory policy-relevant (Storper and Manville, 2006).

Indeed, insights from psychology have been important to the field of behavioural economics (Simon, 1955; Tversky and Kahneman, 1971, Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Kahneman, 2011), by debunking some of the myths about rational choice and decision-making and criticising unrealistic models of human behaviour. Likewise, explanations about the process of urbanisation, particularly the tendency for agglomeration in cities, have all too often been based on models of strict economic rationality, applied to the decisions of individuals and firms, and can profit from an alternative perspective highlighting human cognitive biases and their impact on perceptions and choices.

The analogy with self-help books is therefore important, because the logic behind those publications 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 and collective responsibility as a 'bottom-up' individual empowerment of citizens (Amin,

2013), similarly seen as rational, resourceful and free from social constraints. Recent research in the United States shows that people – especially the poorest individuals – are indeed willing to accept vast amounts of inequality, as long as they *believe* they also have the opportunity to succeed, overestimating the likelihood of upward mobility and underestimating 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, regardless of the political, social and economic status quo (Gleeson, 2012). Highlighting some biases through which we understand the world may help to tone done some of these celebratory, but paralysing narratives that have spread to policymaking and media all over the world.

We proceed by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of moving to cities, both as perceived in recent history and supported by actual evidence. Then we relate the literature about the cognitive biases embedded in decision-making and expectations about the future to the rationale under which cities are conceived as sites of promise and prosperity. We stress that our arguments apply to contexts where people have relatively reasonable options available, even if leading to very different socio-economic outcomes, rather than to extreme situations across the globe where cities are an escape from hunger, war or persecution, in which other decision-making mechanisms related to survival certainly prevail. We conclude with messages for research and policy, discussing the incorporation of psychological findings in urban studies as a way to question rationality assumptions, and the implications of either exploiting our cognitive biases to fuel powerful narratives about urban triumphs or acknowledging them to create more aware and critical participants in urban life.

2. Examining the reality of urban promises

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

While cities have historically been a strong magnet for people seeking safety, shelter, freedom, interaction and, particularly, opportunities for social mobility, a scalar shift happened around the industrial age. In previous economic regimes, most people, even those living in towns, were bounded to specific places (by feudalist 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. The rural-urban migration in the 19th century and its impact on socio-economic conditions has been studied in detail by Long (2005), who found that the move from rural to urban areas was generally not triggered by famine or poverty, but by a perception of opportunity for socio-economic improvement, thereby escaping an inherited intergenerational career 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 such upward mobility did not benefit everyone, and the chance of downward mobility was substantial. Furthermore, his statistics are necessarily 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. Despite a potential upward socio-economic mobility, 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 (and thereby planted the seeds of modern city planning: see Hall, 2002), stressing the economic opportunity argument was in the interest of an urban elite – e.g. factory owners – which fuelled the narrative of urban promises to attract more labour force (Ross, 2011). The picture emerging from these early responses to such promises is one of stark contrast between the economic opportunity offered by cities to some, and the negative social and health impacts that came with urban living, making the urban experience troublesome for many.

Escalator regions
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 to a higher level, 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 much evidence of a beneficial impact on wages of moving into cities, but at least part of it can be explained by the fact that it is the young and talented, rich in human capital, that tend to migrate to 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., 2011). But the idea is that they advance faster in a (metropolitan) environment that allows them to better develop their human and social capital, by having access to learning opportunities, acquiring tacit knowledge and having more opportunities to frequently change jobs, enabling even more and more diversified tacit knowledge.

While Glaeser and Mare (2001) find evidence that such escalator effects can be experienced by all urban migrants, Gordon (2015) emphasizes that it 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. A willingness to migrate to cities can be seen as a sign of ambition, and ambitious people can be disproportionally found among urban migrants. Yet, motives for migration vary, and advancing careers or increasing income are just two of them. Economic factors are 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). A move towards career opportunities for one household member

may even lead to disruptions of employment or income streams for the partner, meaning "that the escalator (or elevator) will not apply equally to all migrants" (Newbold, 2015: 60).

Indeed, with different personal characteristics, migration motivations, levels of human capital and the knowledge intensity of jobs playing a role in the question whether one experiences the escalator effect, it naturally follows that the escalator has limited capacity and is often inaccessible. Furthermore, the escalator cannot be found everywhere, and some go further up than others: only a select class of metropolitan regions seems to function as an escalator region (Newbold and Brown, 2012; Champion et al., 2014).

2.2 Towards a fuller account of urban living

Occupational attainment or nominal wages do not capture the full picture of what social mobility is about. The supposed urban wage premium must be regarded with care as real wages (adjusted by costs of living) do not appear to be higher in larger cities (Glaeser and Maré, 2001). Tabuchi and Yoshida (2000) find that while nominal wages increase with city size, real wages actually decline. Their interpretation that people are willing to give up real wages to enjoy the consumer amenities that are typically found in large cities is most fitting with the 'urban promises' principle. But the declining real wages in cities could, in a more pessimistic view, simply mean that cities actually do not deliver what people expect, also because many of the luring consumer amenities or 'bright city lights' are only available to those who can actually afford them.

It is fair to say that 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. Brugmann, 2009). But other problems persist. Research has shown that inhabitants of large cities experience higher crime rates (Glaeser and Sacerdote, 1999), more traffic congestion (Broersma and Van Dijk, 2008), more pollution (Burgalassi and Luzzati, 2015), are more exposed to infectious diseases (Alirol et al., 2011) and experience higher levels of social isolation and loneliness (Scharf and De Jong Gierveld, 2008). The recent World Migration Report (International Organization for Migration, 2015: 75) states that "migration can actually result in conditions of exclusion and vulnerability for the individuals who are moving […] often faced with legal, cultural and social barriers and obstacles to accessing formal housing, employment, education, health and other social services". 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: "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). These non-monetary agglomeration costs tend to be poorly anticipated when making a residential location decision, but may offset the benefits of living in cities.

It follows that the life experienced in cities cannot just be captured in monetary or economic terms; we need to consider indicators that enable a wider grasp of the urban experience. Recently, attention has 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) and is commonly measured by asking people how happy or how satisfied they are with their life. An extensive body of literature has now discussed the determinants of life satisfaction and developed a broad consensus that it can be explained to a large extent by genetic factors and personality traits (Layard, 2005; Veenhoven, 2010). In addition, various individual socio-economic characteristics (health, social relationships, marital status, employment, income) and environmental factors, such as the quality of the living environment, also play a role.

But do residents of cities have better lives than residents of the countryside? Although residents of cities in the developing world indeed report higher levels of subjective well-being compared to 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; Gerdtham and Johannesson, 2014; Lenzi and Perucca, 2014). Hoogerbrugge and Burger (2017) speak in this regard of an urban happiness paradox.

To explain unhappiness in larger cities of the western world, we must first consider that the benefits of living in cities are often outweighed by their associated monetary and non-monetary costs. Whereas cities appear to be good for firm productivity and employment (Rosenthal and Strange, 2004), they may not be the best places for pursuing the good life. Additionally, the low subjective well-being scores of residents of larger cities can be explained by a selection bias of unhappy people moving into cities: people looking for a better life, but whose life satisfaction does not improve after moving from the countryside to the city. In this regard, Hoogerbrugge and Burger (2017) found that people moving from the countryside to the city already report low levels of subjective well-being prior to the move, which hardly improve after moving. Apparently, there is a discrepancy between the expected and the experienced quality of life in cities but people seem to be overly optimistic about the future when moving there.

3. Understanding the psychology of urban promises

The above discussion suggests that evidence about the actual benefits of moving to, and living in cities is mixed at best. But any historical overview of the rapid growth of the largest cities reveals the generalised belief by populations that urban migration would improve their life conditions. Cities were experienced as dirty, crowded and poor, but also expected to be rich in opportunity (Williams and Donald, 2011); in this gap between *expected* and *experienced* lies the comparative advantage of cities in their ability to attract and retain people, based not only on what they can actually offer but also on what people *believe* they can offer. As many psychological studies have demonstrated, 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 duration, 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 upon 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 rationalization 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 of inadvertently induced. Figure 1 presents a scheme of the relevant cognitive mechanisms.
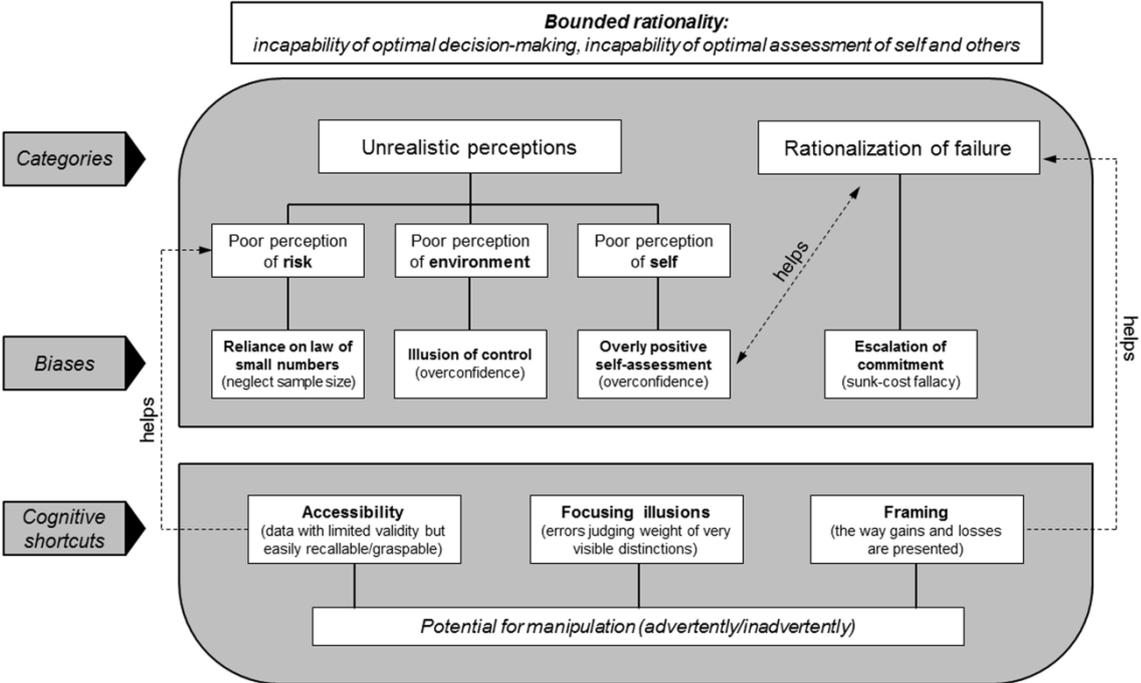

Figure 1. Cognitive mechanisms involved in decision-making under bounded rationality.

Perception of risk, the 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. They base their decisions on a reliance 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 relative who achieved success after moving to the city may be enough to send us down the same path. Indeed, 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). People under the illusion of control see causality in random events and retrospectively explain outcomes by reconstructing the actions which apparently led to them, overestimating their own instrumental role (Miller and Ross, 1975) or fetishizing the effect of a specific object or 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 (and making them likely to buy the next book). Similarly, in an environment saturated with positive messages about the city 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 urban environments to improve our lives – another form of spatial fetishism. Encompassing structural forces emanating from the spatial opportunity structure of cities (Galster and Killen, 1995) are thus overweighed, 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.

The overly optimistic self-assessment bias plays a role in this imbalance. Surveys show that *most* people believe they have more qualities and better future prospects than *most* other people (Taylor and Brown, 1988), a tendency known as the 'better-than-average' effect (Alicke and Govorun, 2005). In other words, the urban escalator may be only available for some, but everyone tends to believe it includes them. Despite the logical inconsistency of these self-serving assessments, they are seen by some as adaptive strategies that actually improve mental health, strengthening motivation and protecting us from pessimism (Taylor and Brown, 1988): for instance, self-help book readers, feeding on such contradictions, tend to be more optimistic and mentally healthier than average people (Bergsma, 2008).

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. Applying this idea to

decision-making under uncertainty, 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 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, stressing the difficulty of assessing the benefits of moving to and living in cities, which may suffer from a positive bias: *most* people believe their lives have improved over time, but also think that the life of the *average* person has not (Hagerty, 2003).

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.

Approach to 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 (and paradoxically) 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 magnitude of these promises is precisely what makes them unattainable for most, thus making people likely to rationalize the failure and try again: disappointments 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.

It is this process that arguably allows 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, "a refuge into a relatively safe and familiar residential setting. 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". There is evidence for such a negative selection bias in return migration, although social motives such as family and friends play an important role as well (Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011). Consequently, those who do not manage to step up the escalator may return 'in disgrace' to their former settings, suffering the contempt of others. But the ones who insist, even if objectively worse off, keep their condition hidden from social disdain and can hope for their own lucky moment one day.

3.2 (Self-)inducing cognitive biases

Psychologists and behavioural economists see the biases of poor perception of risk, overly optimistic self-assessments, illusions of control 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' that we use 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 discourses about 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 (which is sometimes received with irony by locals). 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, 2003: 479), full of opportunity and empowerment, while implicitly endorsing the neglect of public intervention in the city.

Highlighting another effect of framing choices, Storper and Manville (2006) argue that one of the difficulties of making preferences more measurable and relevant for urban policy is that they are incorrectly framed, as some are 'second-order preferences' – things that we would 'prefer to prefer', but cannot, as they are tied to other choices - which (in)advertently pass as actual choices in the eyes of policymakers. For instance, while we

might prefer to move to the city, we would also prefer not to face congestion and drive long hours to work every day. The fact that the second occurrence is 'bundled' (Storper and Manville, 2006) with the first, but incorrectly framed as such. leads to seemingly conflicting preferences to which built environments (and policies) cannot adjust quickly.

Accessibility

Urban imaginaries often rely on very rich and complete 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 (Kahneman, 2011). This means that, 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 with imagery and anecdotes, such as the old *Stadtluft macht frei* motto as an 'escape raft from servitude' (Gleeson, 2012: 935) or the individual stories about self-made billionaires starting from suburban garages, 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, pollution, 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 (US) judged their own life satisfaction and that of people living in California, and vice versa. While the average life satisfaction was very similar in both places, Midwesterners tended to judge life satisfaction in California as much higher, based on the better weather as a highly salient distinction, which they overweighed relative to the rest. The authors argue that, while the correlation between subjective well-being factors and objective life circumstances is very low, "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); following this perception, many people might actually move to California "in the mistaken belief that this would make them happier" (ibid.: 345).

In the case above, the weather was only one factor, and perhaps not particularly important, but what counts is how much it sets a *difference* from the present situation of the observer. Messages highlighting very visible distinctions between alternative places

(or alternative lifestyles, the basic premise of many self-help books) can exploit the focusing illusion and induce life-changing decisions. Urban promises strive on such illusions: very 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. While the discussion so far evoked the idea of underprivileged populations flocking to cities in search of a better life, highly educated professionals looking for the next career move are likely to follow the same mechanisms. 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 the city. Nevertheless, highly 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. Conclusion

This paper used insights from psychological literature to better understand why people tend to have such strong, positive and often overrated expectations about cities, despite the fact that urban life often does not deliver the good life to all. It thereby provides novel explanations for migration dynamics, as well as for the ability of cities to retain even those people for whom the experienced urban life fell short of expectations. Indeed, and despite all the negative aspects of cities, urban promises have fuelled the imaginations of generations of hopeful migrants, who have invariably exaggerated the potential benefits and neglected the drawbacks of cities. We tried to explain the visible discrepancy between the *expected* and the *experienced* life in cities with the help of theories of decision-making in contexts of uncertainty, which explore notions of bounded rationality in humans rather than assuming the prevalence of rational behaviours and preferences. We found that several common biases present in decision-making are likely to affect the way we understand and act upon the urban narrative. We paid particular attention to the biases emerging from the poor perception of risk, illusions of control, overly optimistic assessments about the self and the environment, and the escalation of commitment in the face of failure. All of them play a role in influencing our decisions about the future and

feature prominently in the way we anticipate and perceive life in cities. These biases can be triggered or strengthened by a variety of heuristics, or sub-optimal cognitive shortcuts, namely framing, accessibility and focusing illusions. These are also embedded features of cognition, but they can be purposefully exploited by techniques of manipulation of information. Hence, when it comes to the promised triumph of the urban for us all, we should be aware of self-help-book-styled, 'miracle cures' promised by city marketing gurus (Storper and Manville, 2006).

Overall, our findings provide a link between urban studies and psychology, overlooked by much existing research. They offer an alternative way to understand urbanisation processes beyond rationalist assumptions about the economic benefits of agglomeration, indifferently applied to the collective behaviour of firms and the individual choices of people. People, with their nuanced and inconsistent behaviours, have been systematically left out of conventional explanations of urban agglomeration, broadly captured by urban economists following a rationalist tradition. We argue that the perspectives offered by psychology (environmental psychology studies about urban contexts are fairly common in psychology journals) provide a promising field for an urban research agenda that aims to privilege people alongside firms as collective agents of the urban economy, tries to account for rather than be blind to inconsistencies, and hopes to offer policy-relevant results.

In parallel, we add an original perspective from which to observe the global history of cities. Linking the trends for urbanisation to fundamental features of human cognition, which are broadly constant in different times and places, can also explain why 'urban promise' narratives and an apparent bias in favour of urban migration have been so consistent and persistent throughout history, regardless of historical periods, social contexts or geographical locations.

We do not wish to downplay the positive aspects of cities. City life has been indeed a source of socio-economic upward mobility, personal freedom, social and technological innovation and quality of life. Agglomeration benefits are evident and most people, especially those looking for greater life opportunities, are right to consider moving to larger cities. Advertising the positive aspects of cities, believing in unlikely promises and following uncertain paths may even have positive outcomes, as they reinforce motivation and help overcome people's reluctance to change due to loss aversion (Berliant, 2010). However, the cognitive biases that make us overestimate the likelihood of success and unrealistically anticipate our future, also make us more willing to accept inequalities and injustices, as long as we *believe* in the opportunity to succeed (Davidai and Gilovich, 2015). When it comes to developing policies that address the major problems of urban life and improve it for a *majority* of people, that belief in bright urban futures should not be appropriated as a pretext to perpetuate spatial and socio-economic injustices.

Finally, the question of how this 'comparative advantage' of cities versus rural areas emerges must be asked. Two possibilities appear: there can be actors with an explicit 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 sheer 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 our reliance on 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 very much present in current urban policy discourses, and the accounts associated with 'urban triumphalism' are often turned by policymakers into uncritical narratives about maximizing economic opportunities, which neglect the power struggles and injustices that tilt the urban playing field (Peck, 2016). However, given the scope of our findings and considering the historical permanence of the 'urban promises' phenomenon, we are more inclined for the second possibility: rather than an 'organized industry' with an incentive to sell the wonders of city life, there are inexorable 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.

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