

Thoughts on the City

Progress never destroys as thoroughly as when it builds

The necessity for space is eminently political. The places in which we live condition the ways in which we live, and, inversely, our relationships and activities modify the spaces of our lives. It's a question of daily experience, and yet we seem incapable of drawing the tiniest result from it. One only needs to take a walk through any city to understand the nature of the poverty of our way of life. Almost all urban space responds to two needs: profit and social control. They are places of consumption organized according to the increasingly strict rules of a market in continuous expansion: the security market. The model is that of the commercial center, a collective privatized space, watched by the people and instruments provided by the appropriate agencies. In the commercial centers, an increasingly "personalized" sociality is built around the consumer and his family; now, one can eat, play with children, read, etc. in these neon places. But if one enters without any money, one discovers that it is a terrifying illusion of life.

The same thing happens, more or less, in the metropolises. Where can one meet for discussion, where can one sit without the obligation to consume, where can one drink, where can one sleep, if one has no money? For an immigrant, for a poor person, for a woman, a night in the city can be long. The moderates, comfortable in their houses, don't know the nocturnal world of the street, the dark side of the neon, when the police wake you up on the benches, when everything seems foreign and hostile to you. When the middle classes are enclosed in their bunkers, cities reveal their true faces as inhuman monsters.

Cities increasingly come to resemble fortresses, and houses, security cells. Social war, the war between the rich and the poor, the governors and the governed is institutionalized in urban space. The poor are deported to the outskirts in order to leave the centers to the offices and banks (or to the tourists). The entrances of the cities and a great many "sensitive" areas are watched by apparatuses that get more sophisticated every day. The lack of access to determined levels of consumption – levels defined and controlled by a fixed computer network in which the data of banking, insurance, medical scholastic and police systems are woven together – determines, in the negative, the new dangerous classes, who are confined in very precise urban zones. The characteristics of the new world order are reflected in metropolitan control. The borders between countries and continents correspond to the boundaries between neighborhoods or to the magnetic cards for access to specific private buildings or, as in the United States, to certain residential areas. International police operations recall the war against crime or, more recently, the politics of "zero tolerance" through which all forms of deviance are criminalized. While throughout the world the poor are arrested by the millions, the cities assume the form of immense prisons. Don't the yellow lines that consumers have to follow in certain London commercial centers remind you of those on which some French prisoners have to walk? Isn't it possible to catch a glimpse of the checkpoints in the Palestinian territories in the militarization of Genoa during the G8 summit? Proposals for a nightly curfew for

adolescents have been approved in cities just two steps away from ours (in France for example). The houses of correction reopen, a kind of penal colony for youth; assembling in the inner courtyards of the popular condominiums (the only space for collective life in many sleeping quarters) is banned. Already, in most European cities, the homeless are forbidden access to the city center, and beggars are fined, like in the Middle Ages. One may propose (like the Nazis of yesterday and the mayor of Milan today) the creation of suitable centers for the unemployed and their families, modeled after the lagers for undocumented immigrants. Metallic grids are built between rich (and white) neighborhoods and poor (and... non-white) neighborhoods. Social apartheid is advancing, from the United States to Europe, from the south to the north of the world. When one in three blacks between the ages of 20 and 35 get locked up in cells (as occurs in the United States, where two million people have been imprisoned in twenty years), the proposal for closing the city centers to immigrants here can pass almost unobserved by us. And many may even applaud the glorious marine military when it sinks the boats of the undocumented foreigners. In an interweaving of classist exclusion and racial segregation, the society in which we live increasingly looks like a gigantic accumulation of ghettos.

Once again the link between the forms of life and the places of life is close. The increasing precariousness of broad layers of society proceeds at the same pace as the isolation of individuals, with the disappearance of meeting spaces (and therefore of struggle) and, at the bottom, the reserves in which most of the poor are left to rot. From this social condition, two typically totalitarian phenomena are born: the war between the exploited, which reproduces without filters the ruthless competition and social climbing upon which capitalist relationships are built, and the demand for order and security, produced and sponsored by a propaganda that is perpetually hammered home. With the end of the "cold war", the Enemy has been moved, both politically and through the media, into the interior of the "free world" itself. The collapse of the Berlin Wall corresponds to the construction of the barriers between Mexico and the United States or to the development of electronic barriers for the protection of the citadels inhabited by the ruling classes. The criminalization of the poor is openly described as a "war of low intensity", where the enemy, "the exotic terrorist", here becomes the illegal foreigner, the drug addict, the prostitute. The isolated citizen, tossed about between work and consumption through those anonymous spaces that are the ways and means of transport, swallows terrifying images of treacherous young people, slackers, cut-throats – and an imprecise and unconscious feeling of fear takes possession of individual and collective life.

Our apparently peaceful cities increasingly show us the marks of this planetary tendency to government through fear, if we learn how to look for them.

If politics is defined as the art of command, as a specialized activity that is the monopoly of bureaucrats and functionaries, then the cities in which we live are the political organization of space. If, on the other hand, it is defined as a common sphere for discussion and decisions regarding common problems, then one could say that

the urban structure is projected intentionally toward depoliticizing individuals in order to keep them in isolation and lost in the mass at the same time. In the second case, therefore, the political activity par excellence is revolt against urban planning as police science and practice; it is the uprising that creates new spaces for encounter and communication. In either sense, the question of space is an eminently political question.

A full life is a life that is able to skillfully mix the pleasure of solitude and the pleasure of encounter. A wise intermingling of villages and countryside, of plazas and free expanses could render the art of building and dwelling magnificent. If, with a utopian leap, we project ourselves outside of industrialism and forced urbanization, in short outside of the long history of removal on which the current technological society is built, we can imagine small communities based on face-to-face relationships that are linked together, without hierarchies between human beings or domination over nature. The journey would cease to be a standardized transport between weariness and boredom and would become an adventure free of clocks. Fountains and sheltered places would welcome passers-by. Wild nature could once again become a place of discovery and stillness, of tremors and escape from humanity. Villages could be born from forests without violence in order to then return to being countryside and forest. We can't even imagine how animals and plants would change when they no longer feel threatened by human beings. Only an alienated humanity could conceive of accumulation, profit and power as the basis for life on Earth. While the world of commodities is in liquidation, threatened by the implosion of all human contact and by ecological catastrophe, while young people slaughter each other and adults muddle through on psycho-pharmaceuticals, exactly what is at stake becomes clearer: subverting social relationships means creating new spaces for life and vice versa. In this sense, a "vast operation of urgent demolition" awaits us.

Mass industrial society destroys solitude and the pleasure of meeting at the same time. We are increasingly constrained to be together, due to forced displacements, standardized time, mass-produced desires. And yet we are increasingly isolated, unable to communicate, devoured by anxiety and fear, unable, above all, to struggle together. Any real communication, any truly egalitarian dialogue can only take place through the rupture of normality and habit, only in revolt.

In various parts of the world, the exploited refuse every illusion about the best possible world, turning their feeling of total spoliation against power. Rising up against the exploiters and their guard dogs, against their property and their values, the exploited discover new and old ways of being together, discussing, deciding and making merry.

From the Palestinian territories to the aarch (village assemblies) of the Algerian insurgents, uprisings free spaces for social self-organization. Often the rediscovered assembly forms are like applications of old traditions of face-to-face relationships hostile to all representation, forged in the pride of other struggles, to the current agenda. If violent rupture is the basis of uprisings, their capacity to experiment with

other ways of living, in hope that the exploited elsewhere will stoke their flames, is what renders them lasting, since even the most beautiful utopian practices die in isolation.

The places of power, even those that are not directly repressive, are destroyed in the course of riots not only because of their symbolic weight, but also because in power's realms, there is no life.

Behind the problem of homes and collective spaces, there stand an entire society. It is because so many work year after year to pay off a loan simply in order to keep a roof over their head that they aren't able to find either the will or the space to talk with each other about the absurdity of such a life. On the other hand, the more that collective spaces are enclosed, privatized or brought under state control, the more houses themselves become small, grey, uniform and unhealthy fortresses. Without resistance, everything is degraded at a startling speed. Where peasants lived and cultivated the land for the rich as recently as fifty years ago, now the people of rank live. The current residential neighborhoods are the most unlivable of the common houses of thirty years ago. Luxury hotels seem like barracks. The logical consequences of this totalitarianism in urban planning are those sorts of tombs in which Japanese employees reload their batteries. The classes that exploit the poor are, in their turn, mistreated by the system that they have always zealously defended.

Practicing direct action in order to snatch the spaces for life from power and profit, occupying houses and experimenting with subversive relationships is a very different thing from any sort of more or less fashionable alternative juvenilism. It is a matter that concerns all the exploited, the left-out, the voiceless. It's a question of discussing and organizing without mediators, of placing the self-determination of our relationships and spaces against the constituted order, of attacking the urban cages. In fact, we do not think that it is possible to cut ourselves out any space within this society that is truly self-organized where we can live our own way, like Indians on reservations. Our desires are far too excessive. We want to create breaches, go out into the streets, speak in the plazas, in search of accomplice for making the assault on the old world. Life in society is to be reinvented. This is everything.

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