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The Totalitarian City

"We must persuade ourselves that it is in the nature of true things to reveal themselves only when their time arrives, this way, they neither manifest themselves too early nor do they find an immature audience to receive them."

Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit

During the nineties, a series of social changes took place - ones which previous decades had slowly paved the way for. They were changes which reflected the advent of a new era far more disturbing than the one preceding it.

The transition from an economy based on production to one based upon services, the dominance of finance over States, the deregulation of markets (including labour markets), the invasion of new technologies and the artificialization of our living environment which followed, the boom of unilateral mass media, the full privatization and commodification of life, the rise of totalitarian forms of social control...

...these are realities born under the pressure created by new needs - needs imposed by a world where globalising economic conditions prevail. These conditions can be reduced to three principal ones: technical efficiency, accelerated mobility and the perpetual present. What is surprising in this new order is not the speed at which transformations are taking place and the destruction of everything that tries to resist them - including ways to feel, think or act - but rather, the absence of a meaningful opposition.

It appears as though constant change has erased the memory of the working population and invalidated experience, reference points, criteria and other basic foundations of objectivity and truth, preventing workers from drawing pertinent conclusions implicit in their defeats. These changes have pulverized the very same working class, dissolving any relationship, turning it into an anomic mass. Adapting to the demands of globalization requires the elimination of the foundations of historical consciousness, along with its class analysis. Turning the masses into involuntary executors of world market laws requires their atomization, their continual movement, and requires them to be submerged into an endless present, characterised by ad hoc developments ready to be consumed on the spot.

Many changes affect the physiognomy of cities, which, thanks to the process of an unstoppable loss of identity, are becoming versions of the same unique

city, or rather - as parts of a single multi-tentacled megalopolis – are becoming an assemblage within the network of the financial world. In accordance with its dynamism, this assemblage can be reorganized functionally (as observed in Catalonia), emptied (as observed in Aragon), or filled (as observed in the Basque Country).

The distribution of space is power's greatest asset, and new urbanism, forged under the rule of currently universalized needs, is the most suitable technique for the manipulation of space, helping to complete both present conflicts and the memory of old ones.

A new uniform lifestyle is being created, one which thrives upon gadgets and a guarded and frenetic way of life, all functioning within an amorphous existential climate which our leaders claim will be the future. The new economy requires new customs, new ways of living and inhabiting, that are incompatible with the existence of previous cities and with their previous inhabitants. This new conception of life based on consumption, motion and loneliness, namely, the total absence of human relations, requires a hygienic artificiality of space to be achieved through the restructuring of technical parameters. The technician is always placed ahead of the ideal, unless of course, he or she is the ideal itself.

The leaders of any city speak the new language of techno-economic innovation, a language which never ends: "a city cannot get stuck", it must "reinvent" itself, "renew" itself, "re-generate" itself, "rejuvenate" itself etc., so it can "join the bandwagon of modernity," "boost the role of new technologies", "develop business parks", "enhance the supply of culture and leisure", "build new hotels", make space for an AVE (High Speed Train) stop, erect "new emblematic buildings", impose a "sustainable" type of mobility and do everything else from the same old familiar story.

The PGOU (General Plans for Urban Restructuring) reclassified land into industrial use, allowing for virtually unrestricted skyscraper construction. Subsequently, modifications and partial plans encouraged commercial land ventures such as the Forum 2004, America Sailing Cup 2007, the Expo 2008, the Fourth Centenary of Don Quixote and the 2012 Olympics.

The real estate operations - known as "pelotazos urbanísticos" - that drive the economy and fund development projects, will see a huge amount of public money transferred to construction companies. It is for this reason that the discretionary "public works award" is a political weapon, as well as a

means of financing political parties and enriching their leaders and intermediaries (10% of overall costs consist of bribes). For “private” commercial venture projects costs amount to at least this much, if not more. 80% of the income of municipalities is tied to the real estate market, the largest capital market in the country. Thus, although the population is ageing and decreasing, 650,000 new houses were built and sold in the last year, most of which involved money laundering operations.

The spectacle of this full speed urbanization is always accompanied by unhindered commercial speculation and corruption. The so-called "fiscal crisis of the State" allowed construction companies, local politicians and architects to direct the process of exploitation of “urban potentialities” (doing architecture means placing oneself fully within the field of the political transformation of totalitarian cities). However, this unification had more serious consequences than corruption and fraud for the base of the ruling class. Our leaders realized that behind this predatory accelerated urbanization, a new society was emerging. This society was a much more unbalanced one and was bringing with it an emotionally destabilized way of life, as well as a new type of man: fragile, narcissistic and uprooted. Architecture and urban planning became the tools for the manufacturing of the new pseudo-human man, supposedly “freed” from the job of interacting with his neighbours, a docile citizen, like a motorist and a controllable individual.

Because this process is in its initial stages and not in its complete and finalised state, all means become secondary to the sole aim of the process. The new society could not develop in semi-compact Francoist cities with historic centres without museifying and with working-class neighbourhoods still standing, nor could it emerge in rural villages characterised by subsistence farming¹.

Certain bonds of sociability that allowed for the emergence of a common purpose and collective actions, continued to survive. They existed as estranged social environments which functioned outside of dominant values. The spatial structures serving economic flows were essential to the removal of these ties and were crucial in the project to erase the memory of the past

¹ The term ‘museify’ refers to a process whereby an element of the past is vividly ‘conserved’ in the present or ‘mummified’. Giorgio Agamben uses phrase ‘museification of the world’ to denote the existence of a separate dimension in which ‘what once was’ continues to dominate.

and to condense the new values of domination. These structures are conurbations, they are metropolitan areas formed through the disorderly merging of various towns, to create what technocrats have termed "urban systems" - large dependent and hierarchical agglomerations.

Atomized and emotionally unstable inhabitants needed a kind of large-scale urban self-service, a "built frenzy" in which everything is motion and consumption, in short, a phagocytising city, organically disjointed and separated from its surroundings. A city which is as indifferent to the supply of water and energy it consumes, as is it to the fate of the garbage and waste it produces.

Waste can provide benefits, such as those emerging from water scarcity and energy transportation (there is already a pollution market which operates through CO2 emissions). But above all, waste can be a source of inspiration; this has already been argued by Frank Gehry, an architect at the service of power who began his career building shopping malls.

Environmentalists, ecologists, "ciudadanistas"² have given us their language. This is why politicians, with the best of intentions, often describe as "green" and sustainable anything that has grass on it, does not cause traffic jams and faces the sun (if the latter referred to things which were quite large, they would be called "Eco-monuments").

Architects drew up plans for the "rehabilitation" of degraded centres, basing their criteria on the highest possible number of buildings to build and highest number of streets to pedestrianize, with the aim of adapting these centres to tourism. New highways, harbour expansions, runways and airports, are expected to place the city in a good position on the map of the "new economy". The managerial world is working speedily with this objective in mind.

Each year, twenty-four cathedrals - those places for consumerist relaxation - are built in this country. These are the shopping malls which are visited by more than 23 million people annually.

² Spanish political jargon to denote those sectors of the middle class that are at risk of dropping out and see themselves among the dispossessed due to the present acceleration and increase of competitiveness brought by the economic globalisation of capitalism.

Occasionally, we witness people regressing slightly, looking back to memories of a not so distant past. They have difficulties seeing the comfort and beauty of new "living machines" (or "eco-flats") and their monumental emblems. However, it is precisely these new forms - built with new materials, manufactured "without child labour", employing new techniques that aren't "bad for the environment", and of course, based on a total privatization, on constant displacement and on video surveillance - which reflect the new social relations.

The new citizen-habitat functions as a kind of mould, or rather, an orthopaedic prosthesis that serves to straighten out the new man. By living in such an environment, the present artificial man will therefore be a man with a rootless future. The paradigm of the new lifestyle found in those fattening farms that some still call cities, is that of senior executives whose star performers are exhibited on our TV screens. It has nothing to do with the old bourgeois style and its concern for the affluence and enjoyment of an exclusive minority. The new style is not to be enjoyed. Its aim is to help one display oneself.

The city is now show-business.

To a large extent, the urban manifestation of this takes the form of monuments. Monumental buildings, usually thought of as part of a typically bourgeois tradition, are integrated into a classist environment, helping to define the dominant sector of the city. Whether in the form of housing, department stores or train stations, bourgeois architecture attempts to reorganise the urban network in a hierarchical fashion, where it exists.

The bourgeois architect makes space "bourgeois", but does not suppress it. This was not the case with the Francoist architecture during the sixties, which was backed by a fledgling construction industry and forceful commercial speculation. Francoist buildings, conceived not as part of a unique set, but as singular entities (and singular deals), dislocate urban space. They are like strange objects embedded in completely alien neighbourhoods, interrupting the landscape to the point of making districts deeply disorganized and desertified. They are monuments to amnesia, not to historical memory. Through their presence, the city expels its authenticity and history, becoming transparent and vulgar. The new architecture, equipped with more powerful means, magnifies these effects of superficiality and destructive anomie.

All it takes is a few "designer" buildings for the identity of a city to be reduced to a logo and to be more fragmented than it is when subjected to the motorist chaos of circulation...

...fragmented and full of tourists. Heir to the fascist architecture, the new architecture extols power itself - today this is done through the power of technique. It cannot be said to have a particular style...

...because it aims to dissociate space geometrically, mechanise its habitat, standardize construction, impose the right angle, the air cube.

Airports provide models according to which new cities will have to be built. In the future, cities will be extensions of the airport complex, whose main battering ram is the High Speed Train (AVE).

That form of disembodied realism called "international style" has become the most appropriate, but it may turn out to be too sincere at this stage of the process. Driven by architectural verbalism, our leaders have chosen to employ "designer" architecture for spectacular events to mark the beginning of ambitious urban renovations: hence, we have the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Agbar Tower in Barcelona, "Las Delicias" station in Zaragoza, the "Kursaal" in Donosti (San Sebastian), "L'Auditori" in Valencia... the best thing we can say about these is that they will only look imposing when they burn.

It is the aim of the politicians and businessmen who drive these changes to make cities resemble them and their ambitions. This is why extravagant buildings are still needed. They have to be enormous, and through their size, be capable of transmitting the enormity of the power and the mercantile excitement that motivates commercial developers. This desire to find a majestic expression of the new order is accompanied by the most spectacular aspects, such as design, which can carry great benefits.

We are currently living in the romantic period of the new order. This necessitates architectural symbols, not for its leaders to live amongst, but rather, to represent the ideals of the new globalized society. Through verticality and design, our leaders seek not only the maximum exploitation of construction land or the neutralization of streets, but also the exaltation of ideals shaped by technology and finance.

The main features that define the new urban order are the destruction of the countryside, the "asphalt belts", extreme zonification, growing suburbanization, the multiplication of neutral spaces, verticalization and the deterioration of individuals and techno-surveillance. The bulldozer architecture which characterises this new order, originates from the separation between place and function, between housing and work, between supply and leisure time.

Once the remnants of the former organic unity have been dismantled, the city loses its contours and the citizen is obliged to travel long distances to undertake any activity - all whilst being entirely dependent upon the car and mobile phone.

Movement comes to serve a separate, autonomous function - the most influential in determining the morphology of new cities.

The cities, inhabited by people in motion, begin to devote themselves to a widespread use of cars.

The car, the old status symbol, is now the main prosthesis that connects the individual to the city.

Note that the alleged freedom of movement that it should provide the user with, is actually a freedom of movement through a territory of commodities, the freedom to enforce the laws of market dynamics. In other words, the motorist can never move in the opposite direction.

Your place on the social ladder is found in the corresponding hierarchization of territory produced by the unlimited expansion of the city: the workers inhabit the outer districts and zones of the city; poor or undocumented immigrants and the precarious workforce live in the ghettos; the leaders live in the centre of the city, or in the luxury residential areas; the middle class lie between them.

The remaining open urban space is being progressively filled with green, neutral, empty and sunny areas, while the street disappears as a public space. Public space as a whole is neutralized once it loses its role as a place for human interactions and relationships to develop (hence, as the place of freedom), and becomes a dead pit, accompanied by the built-up area and its isolated parts (a place of total disconnection).

Space only becomes useful in the attempt to contain a crowd moving in a continually directed way, rather than to go against established norms, or to stop.

The processes of dispersion and atomization brought on by the establishment of the logic of machines in everyday life, are reflected in everything that modern architecture inflicts upon individuals. These are seen as a sum of psychobiological constants - entities with mechanical features.

The house is no longer the crafted product which feeds the dreams of townhouse buyers. It becomes an industrial product with forms specifically designed to crush tenants, individuals who have had their needs thoroughly simplified: work, move, eat, have fun and sleep.

The house must also be completely closed (think of the tendency to suppress balconies, to reduce the size of the windows and shield the doors) and equipped with devices to satisfy both the frightened tenants' obsession for security and the need for autonomy demanded by their sick and absorbent privacy.

The communal aspects of housing must be minimal so that nobody knows anyone else and can therefore live in the greatest possible privacy; the social functions previously carried out by neighbours have been reduced to technical functions, which are to be solved either individually or by resorting to "professionals".

The house is a cell because society has become a prison.

The wounds that mass society inflicts upon individuals are good indicators of the lie that dominates in our society.

The lack of integration of the individual within the environment is truly traumatic: the loss of communal reference points, the anonymity and fear, lead to the social disruption of behaviour, the lack of solidarity, to neuroses relating to "security", and all sorts of dysfunctional and extreme behaviours. These open the door to diseases such as obesity, bulimia, anorexia, addictions, compulsive consumption, hypochondria, stress, depression, the modern syndromes...

All the neuroses which affect the modern man could be summed up by working out the average between the symptoms of a man who has shut

himself away, a promiscuous man, a rock star fan, and a football fan. If to this, we add the desire to be eternally young, the panic generated by old age and the growing aggressiveness towards difference, we reach what W. Reich described as an "emotional plague". This is at the basis of the mass psychology at the heart of fascism. Moreover, the human body suffers as a result of the constant aggressions of an unhealthy urban environment where pollution, noise and mobile phone waves work with industrially manufactured food and the consumption of anxiolytics, to cause allergies, heart disease, immunodeficiency, diabetes or cancer. All these are typically modern diseases that reveal the state of physical decline of a population with highly pathogenic living habits which neither TV fashion diets, parks and gardens, nor "green" and "selective" garbage collections will manage to change.

The city is turning us all into ill, neurotic and fascist people.

So-called democratic leaders have achieved, through technical means, what totalitarian regimes achieved through political means and means of policing: overcrowding through total isolation, relentless mobility and absolute control.

The contemporary city is gently totalitarian because it is the realization of the Nazi-Stalinist utopia without gulags, without sounds of broken glass.

We are witnessing the end of the modalities of social control which were an integral part of the classical bourgeois epoch. The family, the factory, and the prison were the disciplinary means to integrate or reintegrate individuals into class society; subsequently, the "welfare" state added to these the education system, the trade unions and social security and benefits systems.

In this advanced phase of domination in which we find ourselves, the disciplinary system is now expensive and deemed ineffective, given that its purpose is no longer the introduction or rehabilitation of social danger, but rather, its neutralisation and containment. For the first time, entire sectors of the population, those who are excluded or exclude themselves from the market, those easily identified as young, as independentists, immigrants, precarious workers, beggars, drug addicts, religious minorities... are deemed to be impossible for society to assimilate... they are sectors whose potential social risk needs to be detected, isolated and managed.

It is no longer simply the infringement of the law which is prosecuted, but

also, the presupposed willingness to break it. Thus, the treatment of social exclusion and the protest it generates, leaves any political consideration aside and becomes directly punitive.

Ultimately, everyone is a potential infractor. Thus, the social question is turned into a criminal matter, a conversion accompanied by a series of new laws, bills and reforms that validate or suppress rights and introduce a permanent state of emergency. For example, the creation of the legal concept of being 'suspicious' will legally justify the existence of blacklists, imprisonments without trial and arbitrary expulsions.

We are witnessing the end of the separation of powers, namely, the formal independence between the government, parliament and the judiciary. Thus, a low-intensity civil war begins to take place that allows for a poorly disguised repression of the non-integrated or "suspicious" segments of the population. The effects of this on the city are crucial in allowing strictly prison-like surveillance to extend onto all its streets. First, come the banks, shopping malls, leisure centres, administrative buildings, stations, airports, etc. which put in place sophisticated security and identification systems and install video surveillance cameras; then workplaces are monitored to prevent theft and sabotage carried out by employees; finally, the entire urban space becomes subjected to the security neuroses.

The neighbours, encouraged by consistories, make their contribution by snitching on "uncivil" behaviours.

The city adapts to functioning as a jail under any pretext: for terrorists, serial killers, paedophiles, juvenile delinquents, undocumented or "illegal" foreigners... even smokers.

Nothing is sufficient to relieve the public hysteria that the media has fostered.

If the role of the family or the union as disciplinary tools is in crisis, other instruments of containment and surveillance are experiencing an unprecedented boom: the educational system, the prison complex and the ghettos. Prolonged and extensive schooling is the best way to locate and tame the youth population. The proliferation of forms of confinement and "surveilled" freedom are doing the same to the offender population.

Finally, the high price of housing and mobbing push the undesirable

segments of the population away from those central spaces where “zero tolerance” policies rule, and lead to a concentration of these segments in slums, where they are isolated and left to themselves.

From everything we have seen so far, it would not be unreasonable to infer that the order in the new metropolis - where nobody can hide - is A TOTALITARIAN ORDER, WHICH IS TO SAY PURE FASCISM.

The struggle for the liberation of space is a frontal struggle against its privatization and commodification. This fight, as we have said, takes place under fascist conditions.

Such conditions make the situation very difficult for supporters of expropriation and collective self-management of space, favouring instead, those who prefer to "embellish", alleviate and mitigate their own degradation.

However, rebuilding a free community within a framework of equal and fraternal relations is critically dependent upon the availability of circuits outside of capital and commodities, namely, upon territories that have to be seized from the market and ones where segregated populations can settle and protect themselves.

Previous struggles against capital have always relied upon external and opaque areas.

We can no longer do this.

We must create them, but never be satisfied solely with them.

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