

Presentation at the event “The city as the space of the commodity and of capitalist power and as the ground for claiming historical freedom” on the occasion of the publication of the book *The Society of the Spectacle: Notebooks for Reading and Practice*.

Introduction

As we wrote in the text against the eviction of the Rosa Nera occupation that we published in September 2020, the occupations constitute a space in the city that is liberated by the antagonistic movement against capital and the state. They are one of the fundamental forms of the practical critique of capitalist urbanism, one of the fundamental forms of expropriation of the wealth that we collectively produce every day but which confronts us as an alien force and dominates us by taking the form of capital and capitalist property.

On this temporarily and incompletely liberated territory and using the miniscule piece of social wealth we have expropriated, a collective attempt is made to transform the alienated space-time of everyday life in the capitalist city into a space of meeting, living dialogue and struggle. This is precisely why all kinds of functionaries of the state and capital (ministers, investors, mayors, rectors and other scum) attack Rosa Nera and all the squats that have been repressed and evacuated in recent years with such fury. The stakes are none other than the perpetuation of the power of dead labour over living activity, the perpetuation of the power of death over life. The repression of the occupations is an aspect of capital's attempt to synthesize the totality of urban space into its own decor.

The life and content of the occupation clashes both, on the one hand, with the exploitation of labour and the appropriation of the human environment by the (not only) touristic capital, and, on the other hand, with the provision of cultural and other services by the municipal and state authorities, who strive to reproduce the fragmented unity of today's society and the absolute lack of real communication that defines it, and to pacify discontent with the misery of everyday life by organizing separated cultural activities. In the face of the pseudo-communication of culture sponsored by state and municipal authorities, Rosa Nera and all the occupations constitute a pole for reestablishing real communication and for reclaiming the control over our creative activity, as the initiatives undertaken in the occupation over the last 17 years show.

The Society of the Spectacle: Notebooks for Reading and Practice

At the end of May 2021 we managed to release our new publication entitled *The Society of the Spectacle: Notebooks for Reading and Practice*. This book is the product of the collective work we have been doing for over two years in a *Group for*

Discussion and Critique that was formed to study the original work by Debord. In this book we approach the spectacle as the form of appearance of capital when it has already **subsumed all spheres of life to its valorisation**. In contrast to money, which is the visible form of capital as a social relation of production and domination in the sphere of the economy, the spectacle is the appearance of capital in its totality, that is, the appearance of the totality of capitalist relations encompassing politics, ideology, the city, culture, and so on. Thus, “[s]ociety in its length and breadth becomes capital’s faithful portrait”.¹

The spectacle, like money, according to Marx’s formulation, is visible but dazzling to our eyes, as it both expresses and conceals capital as a social relation. *The Society of the Spectacle* proceeds in the logical development of categories, from the spectacle as perfected separation –that is, as the organized unity and structured totality of the separated spheres of society– and proceeds to the particular separated spheres which it unifies and which constitute its particular **instances**: the commodity; politics, the divisions within it and their essential unity; the proletariat as representation; spectacular pseudo-cyclical time; territorial organization and urbanism; culture; and ideology. Capital has fragmented life into separate spheres that are all unified under its domination. The spectacle is the way in which both this perfected separation and each separated sphere appear – and therefore exist. Moreover, Debord uses the term spectacle to express the fact that the human being is not in any sphere of life the real agent of its activity; it does not really control it but contemplates it, becomes a spectator of it. Its activity loses its practical character and becomes a contemplative stand. Therefore, we should not understand spectacle in the narrow sense of television, cinema or advertising, although these are some of its expressions.

To put it in simpler terms, the concept of capital describes a social relation in which the creation / the product, dominates the creator. Individual capitalists themselves believe that they are the subjects of the economy, but in reality, as crises and quasi-natural economic ups and downs demonstrate, they too are objects of the general movement of the economy and they are personifications of capital, an impersonal economic force that transcends them. When capital dominates all spheres of life, this autonomy of the creation over the creator is expressed in representations, in a set of images that vary from sphere to sphere. To mention just a few examples, at the sphere of politics it is expressed in the images of powerful men, iron ladies and in patriotic mythology, at the sphere of art it is expressed in the stars of high and popular arts, at the sphere of territorial planning in postcards of tourist destinations, at the sphere of spectacular time in the pseudo-cyclically repeated celebrations of the commodity. The spectacle must not be equated with these images. It is rather the social relation mediated by them: the domination of capital over its creators, the transformation of people into spectators of their own

¹ G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, 1994, p. 33.

activity, in each individual sphere and as a whole. Moreover, the spectacle as the loss of people's control over their lives is the common element that unifies all these separated spheres, just as it unites separated people who have been transformed into isolated individuals and families. The state itself is one version of the spectacle.

In this sense, Debord attempts, through the concept of spectacle, to theoretically reconstruct social reality as an organic whole constituted in and through the autonomization of the forms of appearance of capital (economic, political, ideological forms). For this very reason, the revolutionary class struggle can no longer aim only at liberation from poverty. It is necessary to aim at the emancipation from all aspects of the spectacular domination of capital in all spheres of social life – at the emancipation from the discontent that lurks within the dominant images of satisfaction and social meaning.

In today's event, which takes place after the reoccupation of Rosa Nera and on its seventeenth birthday, we will focus on the sphere of territorial planning and urbanism and we will talk about the city as a space of capitalist-spectacular power and as the ground for claiming historical freedom, on the basis of the theoretical elaboration we have done on the corresponding chapter of the *Society of the Spectacle*.

Urbanism as the production of the abstract, homogenized and frozen capitalist space

The chapter entitled "Territorial Management" begins with the famous passage from *The Prince*, where Machiavelli stresses that the ruler of a city must eradicate the historical memory of freedom and rebellion from its inhabitants and that the only way to do this is to organize their division and dispersion. This is precisely the function performed by capitalist-spectacular urbanism, which builds the unity of the city on the fragmentation of its inhabitants.

For Debord, urbanism is not just a field of bourgeois scientific knowledge. Rather, it is the practice of the shaping of the very space of human existence and activity by capital. Capitalism does not merely appropriate or even shape human activity. It appropriates and shapes its very ground. This is how capitalist space is produced. Capitalist space is a homogenized, unified and therefore abstract space. Just as in the capitalist exchange of commodities the real abstraction of value makes commodities exchangeable and equivalent through money, abstracting from their utility and their concrete character, so space loses its own concrete reality, its very particularity. At the same time, abstract space is the basis of the organization of abstract labour and exchange. The result of the process of abstraction becomes in its turn its presupposition.

A good example to illustrate this process is given by tourism as a special case of the circulation of commodities. The circulation of commodities obviously includes

the circulation of a peculiar commodity that exists in capitalist society: labour power. Human circulation seen from the viewpoint of commodity production is the transport of the labour power commodity to the sites of production. From the viewpoint of individual consumption, this same circulation is expressed, among other consumption activities, as tourism. Tourism is therefore the movement of individuals from place to place as something that can be consumed and bears the hallmarks of the mass consumption of commodities. Consequently, just as commodities are produced and consumed in turn, in a uniform way –with their common property the fact that they are carriers of value– so the massive journey of people to other places as an activity, but in the capacity of tourist, is now reduced to a banality.

Even the very otherness of spaces and landscapes is subject to this homogenisation: it is abolished and becomes equally a moment of banality. The way, the means and the time allotted for this form of activity homogenise places that apparently have their own particular and natural characteristics. Obviously, the emphasis here is on how a situation is subjectively understood when experienced by the subjects, as well as on the social production of this understanding. Otherwise, each distinct space, landscape, place would retain a uniqueness if it were treated independently of a socially produced meaning.

But beyond the homogenization of meaning, this subordination to the logic of the economy also transforms and homogenizes the concrete reality of different spaces and their unique properties. We can think of the advertisements of tourist agencies, with their identical “tourist packages” and the unchanging, dull, shallow packaging in which they are marketed. Exotic paradises, crystal-clear waters, metropolises teeming with life, picturesque destinations of infinite beauty, and all the associated airs and graces of the spectacular language of advertising. This advertising banalisation has correspondingly produced a circuit of identical homes, offices, motorways, resorts, hotels, beaches and airports.

Capitalist urbanism is in essence the visible suspension of life, its dispossession, the removal of people's ability to freely determine their lives and to change themselves and their environment. It satisfies capitalism's need for the continuation of its domination through the suspension of historical creation. The “restless becoming that takes place in the progression of time” is dominated by a “peaceful coexistence in space”. In other words, urbanism organizes the subordination of living labour, and life more broadly, to capital, that is, to dead/past labour. It organizes the subordination of the present to the past.

There is a constant antagonism between the planned and abstract space and the lived space of social and class refusals. In contrast to the abstract and frozen space of the experts (architects, urban planners, government officials), the lived space of refusals is a space of **subjects**, not a space of calculating profit and of the commodity.

Urbanism and class power

But urbanism is not just the production of the specifically capitalist abstract space. Its basic function is the control of population and the defence of class power. As Debord points out, the growth of cities under capitalism and the concentration of large proletarian populations in them posed great dangers for capitalist power. Urban planning obviously plays a central role in averting this danger. First of all, measures for the maintenance of order are increased. For example, the police are created, alleys are mapped, named and numbered. However, in Debord's view, modern urbanism is more about organising isolation than about surveillance and repression. As he notes, the aspirations of power culminate in the "abolition of the street".

Debord refers here to "urban sprawl", i.e. the expansion of cities by creating new suburbs away from the centre (suburbia) where people can only travel by car to work, to the market or to leisure areas. In particular, it refers to Lewis Mumford's monumental work, *The City in History*, who as early as 1961 had already identified and deeply criticised this organisation of isolation. On the one hand, Mumford refers to the abolition of the street as a point of meeting and direct communication between the inhabitants of the city, who were acquainted with each other, citing as an example the relationship between the inhabitants and the workers in the local shops. In contrast, in cities like Los Angeles, people visit a faceless supermarket every week where they don't know anyone and only by accident might run into someone they know. On the other hand, Mumford points out that this lack of contact is replaced by mass media where knowledge is only transmitted through guarded channels. It seems that the latter point about guarded and one-way media is now obsolete given that we live in the Internet age, but Mumford includes the telephone among the 'guarded channels of communication'. In addition, he proves prophetic when he refers to cars that will be driven automatically [or remote-controlled!] As he writes, former drivers will watch television in cars, having lost even the freedom to hold their steering wheel.

However, capitalist society cannot be based simply on isolation as both production and consumption require the development of new alienated forms of collectivity, which integrate individuals into the system as individuals in common isolation. This role is performed by public and private organisations of entertainment, cultural consumption, culture and events. The same is largely true of the virtual communities created on social media. Of course, even within such alienated forms of collective life, moments of detournement can occur, as shown by the use of social media by social movements or by the use of public spaces during riotous events. In this case, however, the way they are used is completely transformed.

Urbanism and housing

In the book Debord also touches on another dimension of urbanism, the so-called development of architecture for the poor. The development of this architecture takes place during the period when state housing policy emerges as an aspect of the development of the welfare state. The development of the welfare state is an outgrowth of the attempt to mediate the conflicts and contradictions of capitalist social relations in order to ensure the expanded reproduction of capital.

In particular, as far as housing is concerned, we will look at the example of Britain. In the example of Britain, until the beginning of the 20th century the vast majority of the proletariat lived in houses owned by private individuals, usually small landlord capitalists. A large proportion of a proletarian family's income went on rent, with the result that rent increases directly threatened their living conditions. When in World War I landlords attempted to exploit the housing shortage conditions that had been created in some industrial cities due to the high demand for labour from the war industries, the organised labour movement responded by demanding rent control from the state through the threat of a general strike. The government backed down for fear of an expansion of the movement against capital in general, and the rent control that was implemented as an emergency measure continued to exist for many years later, until the 1970s. Apart from the fear of an escalation of class struggle, rent control also served to reduce the cost of the reproduction of labour power for industrial capital, although, according to the Parliamentary Committee that examined the issue, housing conditions were one of the main factors of unrest and therefore the aim of the rent control policy was not primarily economic.²

After the war, a major housing building programme was launched by the British state to build 500,000 houses within three years. Subsidies were given for house building not only to local authorities and communities but also to private individuals in order to increase the supply of housing in order to keep rents within certain levels. The houses built at that time were called "Homes fit for heroes". It is therefore clear that state housing policy, at least in Britain, was directly aimed at countering the revolutionary threat. Besides, apart from building new houses for working class "heroes", the state housing policy was also a policy of slum clearance and of the demolition of unauthorised buildings where proletarians lived, as slums were and continue to be high-risk areas for rebellions against capital and the state.

So a mass project of building houses for proletarians is undertaken. Their architecture is obviously functionalist, i.e. aimed specifically at covering the necessary functions of the reproduction of labour power (sleep, nourishment, hygiene, sanitation, recreation) and they are mass-produced. Hence the misery of their form.

² Simon Clarke and Norman Ginsburg, "The Political Economy of Housing", *Kapitalstate* 4/5, 1976.

The state housing policy aims at reducing the cost of reproduction of labour power, but above all it aims at the control of proletarians. It seeks to create a city and a society that functions like a factory, within the mass production-mass consumption social model. For this reason, the land is shaped in an abstract way – that is, on the basis of the law of value– into a space for the abstraction of proletarian experience in order to produce a new subjectivity, a new type of social existence of the proletarian as an isolated private individual, who even imagines that he belongs to the so-called “middle class”.

Debord can be criticized here for the fact that he sees the development of this new architecture as a result of industrialisation, in rather deterministic terms. As the British case has shown, this is not correct. On the contrary, it is the result of class and social struggles and of the attempt to mediate and control them. In Greece, for example, a different state housing policy was pursued with the legalization of illegal housing and the “land-for-apartment exchange system”, which encouraged owner-occupation.

The city as the ground for claiming historical freedom

Debord shares Marx's position as reflected in the medieval saying: "Stadtluft Macht Frei" (City Air Brings Freedom). This saying was also a customary law according to which a serf was freed after a year and a day's stay in the city if his master did not catch him by then. It was formally abolished in 1231 by the Holy Roman Empire for cities under its jurisdiction! As this saying indicates, throughout the Middle Ages the flight of serfs to the cities in search of freedom continued uninterrupted. And it was in the cities that both the bourgeois and the proletarian revolutionary movement developed. Of course, as Marx and Engels note in the *German Ideology*: «*Thus, in imagination, individuals seem freer under the dominance of the bourgeoisie than before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are more subjected to the violence of things*». The violence of things is not only the indirect economic coercion but also the direct state violence that we have to confront.

There is therefore a radical difference between the conditions of the emancipation of the serfs and the conditions of the emancipation of the proletarians, on which Marx and Engels continue as follows: «*The difference from the estate [of feudalism] comes out particularly in the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. When the estate of the urban burghers, the corporations, etc. emerged in opposition to the landed nobility, their condition of existence — movable property and craft labour, which had already existed latently before their separation from the feudal ties — appeared as something positive, which was asserted against feudal landed property [...] Certainly the refugee serfs treated their previous servitude as something accidental to their personality. But [...] they did*

not free themselves as a class but separately. Moreover, they did not rise above the system of estates, but only formed a new estate [the bourgeois estate], retaining their previous mode of labour even in their new situation, and developing it further by freeing it from its earlier fetters, which no longer corresponded to the development already attained. For the proletarians, on the other hand, [as a class] the condition of their existence, labour, and with it all the conditions of existence governing modern society, have become something accidental, something over which they, as separate individuals, have no control, and over which no social organisation can give them control. The contradiction between the individuality of each separate proletarian and labour, the condition of life forced upon him, becomes evident to him himself, for he is sacrificed from youth upward [...] Thus, while the refugee serfs only wished to be free to develop and assert those conditions of existence which were already there, and hence, in the end, only arrived at free labour, the proletarians, if they are to assert themselves as individuals, will have to abolish the very condition of their existence hitherto [...], namely, labour. Thus they find themselves directly opposed to the form in which, hitherto, the individuals, of which society consists, have given themselves collective expression, that is, the State. In order, therefore, to assert themselves as individuals, they must overthrow the State."

Therefore, while for the liberated serfs who became bourgeois the city was a real space of liberation - even if it was a limited and individual liberation - for the proletarians this was not immediately true. The city is clearly also for us a ground for claiming historical freedom and *a site of history* - that is, a site where people take the creation of the world and of themselves into their own hands - because of the concentration of social power that makes this project possible: first of all, because in cities a large number of proletarians is concentrated. However, this concentration is countered by the tendency to disintegrate and decompose the city as a space of social life, which was discussed in the previous sections. Thus, the city under capitalism is only potentially a terrain of emancipation.

The destruction of the city as a space of social life reconstitutes the city as a pseudo-countryside, in that it organizes isolation and separation. Indeed, it is a worse situation than the old countryside where there existed at least the natural rural community. Separation in modern cities begins with the individual and the nuclear family and goes all the way to identity groups, professional groups... and the list never ends. The fact that the apathy of the modern proletariat must be constructed and maintained, however, through urban planning, bureaucracy and, more generally, through the spectacle, highlights that this separation is in fact highly unstable and may at any moment be overturned within the proletarian insurrection.

For Debord it is not only the capitalist city but capitalist space in general that is *quantitative, dead and immobilized existence* - in this he follows Hegel. In contrast, time is *qualitative immanent movement*. This is why he speaks of the subjection of space to lived time within the proletarian revolution. Revolution is therefore a

critique of human geography through which individuals and communities must construct the space and events that correspond to the appropriation, no longer of their labour alone, but of their total history. Thus, a constantly changing *space of play* is created without reproducing the old attachment to the land. Instead, life is conceived and experienced as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.

For Debord, revolutionary urbanism is above all the practical critique of urbanism by class and social struggles against capital and the state, in order *to reconstruct the entire environment and transform the totality of existing conditions*. Overcoming alienation can be nothing less than this. In the text on the Paris Commune published in the 7th issue of the *Situationist International*, the Commune is presented as the only historical example of the **realisation of a revolutionary urbanism**: *“attacking on the spot the petrified signs of the dominant organization of life, understanding social space in political terms, refusing to accept the innocence of any monument”*.

Here, the situationists are referring to the destruction of the Vandom Column by the Communards and the renaming of the Vandom Square to “Square of the International“. In the city of Chania the main example of the practical critique of urbanism is *Rosa Nera*, which is now celebrating its seventeenth birthday, and which has grown further with the occupation of more buildings on the Kastelli Hill.

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