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Urban Struggles and Class Struggle

Miguel Amorós

2011

“To change life you have to change space.” (Henri Lefebvre)

There is no natural space. All space is social space; it implies, contains and dissimulates social relations. Social relations have a spatial existence; they are projected in space and are inscribed upon it by producing it. Because these social relations are capitalist social relations, social space tends to be the space of capital, its field of action and the basis of its activities. Capital absorbs it, breaks it up into pieces and then brings the pieces together again, evacuating it of the subjective and repopulating it with an abstract, submissive and domesticated subject. Urban society replaces and succeeds class society when capital completes the unification and colonization of space. It has produced and shaped its own, abstract, instrumental and manipulable space, and has at the same time produced and shaped its inhabitants, controlling their time. The difference between these inhabitants and the old proletarians is enormous. The latter possessed their own space—the working class neighborhoods—where everyday life, outside of the

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market, was governed by rules and values of a different kind. The new wage laborer has been emancipated from his class; he only orients himself within the urban space with reference to the landmarks of the commodity-spectacle. His everyday life faithfully reproduces the latter's directives. As always, the place he occupies depends exclusively on how much money he makes, but unlike his predecessor, he no longer lives in a collective space, one that is autonomous and historical, but in an abstract space, emptied of meaning, one that is filled with the signs and messages of power.

The conurbation, the constitutive element of urban society, is that space, the result of the uncontrolled growth of the productive forces. Within its confines all political and social problems are exacerbated and neutralized at the same time for, thanks to the blockade against experience, the loss of memory and isolation, the perception of social problems is becoming increasingly more problematic. The conurbation is a space of deranged confinement and training, a space that is not made for memory and daydreams, but for forgetting and sleeping. Like capitalism, it is built on crises: demographic, energy, financial, political, cultural, labor, health, environment, etc.; crisis is its medium and the threat of collapse its stimulus. That is why it is a totally policed and monitored space, where the movements of its inhabitants are managed. In the conurbations, the maximum degree of preventive surveillance can be automated; just like commodities, the population can be traced so as to ensure its constant surveillance. This is a necessity once a certain critical level of insoluble complications and problems has been reached. The control of an increasingly more complex and centralized world can only be encompassed by transforming individuals into robots within a space which urban design and security technologies have rendered neutral, transparent, homogenous and sterilized. A space of this kind fluctuates between the sports stadium, the shopping mall and the prison.

unionism). The apparent impact of this movement, in various disguises—ecologism, alter-globalization, anti-growth, municipalism, alternative trade unionism—makes it necessary for the urban struggle and territorial defense to be waged above all on the terrain of ideas. The necessary practice cannot make progress without them. The ceremony of confusion must be dispelled as soon as possible and the impostors must be exposed, since the revolutionary subject can never arise in connivance with the system, in the form of a cheerful participatory citizenry, but from outside the system and against it, in the form of a furious deserter proletariat.

The almost mechanical domestication of individuals in urban space is being confirmed by the decline of workers and neighborhood struggles. The condition of being a member of the wage labor force no longer suffices to constitute an identity or define a “world”. There is no longer a real working class city within the official bourgeois metropolis, coexisting and standing in contrast with the latter. The conurbations are bereft of mystery, and they have “nothing to say”. In the past, neighborhood groups aspired to integrate outlying districts of the city into the urban world by demanding basic services and utilities. They did not question the urban model; they wanted to be a part of it, but on the basis of equality with the downtown districts. Now, however, the urban struggle cannot stop there, merely changing the stage scenery of slavery; it must question the very existence of the conurbation itself, it must decapitalize it. A basic principle of anti-developmentalism says that a society full of capital is an urban society, which is why a society without capital must be an agrarian society. From this perspective, a liberated urban space would therefore have to be a de-urbanized space. This does not mean the disappearance of the city, which has already been accomplished by the conurbation, but the positive supersession of the city-country opposition and the radical rejection of the decay of both realities into an amorphous sludge. The recovery of the city, the axis of the project in which urban struggles must be inscribed, is paradoxically a process of ruralization.

Today, anti-developmentalism is the only anti-capitalism. Its starting point is the intrinsic harmfulness of capitalist production, which leads it to reject its re-appropriation, an essential point of all socialist programs. The decline of the old proletariat, however, prevents the latter from becoming conscious of this necessity and impedes attempts to clarify new strategies. If the proletariat abdicated its historical mission, that is, if it refused to seize the means of production and distribution, it will be even more likely to be opposed to

its dismantling, in view of the undeniable fact that this would result in a “loss of jobs”. The struggle for higher wages and job security often plays into the hands of domination, due to the fact that after the evaporation of class interests, nothing but individual and corporative interests prevail, interests that are opposed to the “industrial disarmament” that a liberated society requires (e.g., the desperate battle to save jobs at petrochemical plants, automobile factories, nuclear power plants, the private security and construction industries, etc.). The conformist worker, with a mortgage to pay, never questions the nature of his work, which he considers “a job like any other job”, and prefers to ignore the total incompatibility between the current system of production and a free society. Besides, wage labor and indebtedness are the usual forms of subsistence in urban society and follow in the wake of the expansionist pace of the conurbations. They are associated with economic growth, and therefore with the destruction of territory. The territorial conflict necessarily leads to an alliance between the wage workers and the employers and the state (e.g., in the construction of the High Speed Train, highways, dams and water diversion projects, thermal power stations, housing tracts, golf courses and sports complexes, etc.). Their immediate interests are very close and they have no other interests to defend.

The urban struggle takes over from the workers struggle of the past because, since capital is perfectly capable of integrating all labor-related demands, the social question cannot be posed as a labor question, but must be posed as an urban question. The contradictions of the capitalist regime, increasingly less visible at the workplace, unfold and become visible in everyday life, which nourishes the urban conflict. The abstract space of capital is a factory for the mass production of life. Everyday life is a colonized sector, invaded by technology, consumerism and the spectacle. It is private, solitary, imprisoned life; it is an extension of labor, it is equivalent to work. That

“Sustainable” means more of the same, but painted a different color.

Once severe scarcities were left behind, the social conflict has not fully manifested itself within economic activity, but in the opposition between the economy and everything that resists the economy. The main antagonism does not arise in the sphere of production or the service sector, but outside of them and against them: in everyday life, in territories, outside of work and against work. Absenteeism and practices of self-exclusion and cooperation therefore acquire crucial importance. The change of the theoretical paradigm—the end of the proletariat, separation from capitalist social relations, anti-developmentalism—by no means implies a renunciation of the radical struggle or the abandonment of all revolutionary perspective, because antagonisms have not disappeared; they have not even been reduced. They have simply been relocated, and their intensity has been increased. This change of paradigm involves an effort of critical reflection without ideological concessions and a practical reorientation based on dissidence and the return to the territory. But as long as the processes of desertion and resettlement are of little significance the social conflict will drift in ambiguity, because the authentically subversive critique has not made enough progress and antagonisms remain in the shadows. This situation of theoretical obscurity is hardly propitious for the truly Martian ideology of workerism, but instead allows the civil society movement to make dangerous progress, whose proposals—which they want to be viewed as pragmatic and reformist because they are in the vanguard of accumulation—serve to neutralize the struggle. The pseudo-movements of the civil society movement do not confront the contradictions of the capitalist system but instead dissimulate them, proclaiming the neutrality of the state and the possibility of a different kind of capitalism (a different kind of development, a different kind of globalization, a different kind of politics, and even a different kind of trade

The struggle for territory is fought on the stage of the conurbation and its satellites, since the territory has been depopulated and its repopulation depends on the urban areas, but it is no longer an urban struggle in the strict sense of the word, because it takes place in the rural environment. Today it is taking shape as resistance to urbanization, to nuclearization, to industrial agriculture and infrastructure projects, whether they involve transport, hydraulic, energy or communications networks. It is an offensive against planning and the legislation that determines the purposes served by planning and that transforms it into capital. The defense of territory, the struggle for autonomy, is anti-developmental. It is a real class struggle that is more than ever before translated into the world of space. It prevents the spread of abstract space, which becomes a medium of accumulation, and attempts to establish in the liberated territories communitarian relations that are opposed to the market. The defense of territory constitutes the axis of the urban question, because territory subject to capital is no longer a simple reserve of space, but the main source of individual profits and a “deposit” of jobs. The new form of capitalist accumulation starts from the basis of the rising prices of raw materials, the construction of massive infrastructure projects, renewable energy projects, waste recycling, touristic transformation of the landscape, rural tourism, etc., that is, it is based on territory. In this new stage the state recovers its lost importance, since it is no longer a matter of dismantling an increasingly more costly social welfare system and deregulating a labor market with an excessively powerful intermediary role, but of financing a “sustainable economy”, or in other words, of passing the costs of “green” reconversion on to the population. This new market environmentalism is not intended to modify the economic foundations of domination, but to reinforce them. Therefore, it does not entail any proposals to put an end to aggression against territory, waste or consumerism, but to the contrary, its purpose is to ensure their continuation.

is why the urban struggle has the characteristics of a factory struggle; without, however, demanding a more technologically equipped private life, with its time finely divided into its respective functional zones, but a life outside of capital, decolonized and with its own space, disposing of the free use of its time. It is a struggle for space, which must be reconquered and infused with content.

Urban struggles must reveal a new subject, a new proletariat that does not deny by affirming, but affirms by denying; a proletariat that does not seek to universalize the working class condition, but rejects it outright. If it does not question labor itself, it does not question capital: real anti-capitalism is anti-workerist. In order for a collective subject, or, what amounts to the same thing, a class, to constitute itself, it must create its specific space from which it can join forces against the enemy class. The space of capital, populated with wage workers, motorists and consumers, is not adequate for this purpose. It must be transformed, and to do this the first thing that must be done is to deliver it from the grasp of the market. It must cease to be a space of labor, of consumption, of circulation, of leisure, etc. In the new liberated space, its inhabitants must achieve a sufficient degree of autonomy (with regard to food, clothing, shoes, education, transport, health, self-defense, information, etc.). Autonomy is the precondition for the negation of capitalism, the anti-capitalist class, to be able to exist. The development of independent logistics will guarantee the autonomy of a separate collectivity, administering its time and governing its space. Is this possible without in turn liberating pieces of territory? In the conurbations and urban systems a relative degree of autonomy could be achieved, for example, with regard to health or information, but for autonomous provisioning to exist where no one can directly produce their own food, requires the establishment of relations with the producers. Food sovereignty would therefore be the first link between urban struggles and the defense of territory. Even should these

first steps be successfully carried out, however, the problem has only just begun to be addressed. Urban society tends to make dwellings more expensive, eliminate urban gardens, destroy spaces that are used in common and make life hard for dissidents, that is, it tends to enormously complicate attempts at self-marginalization and reduces liberated spaces to diminutive ghettos. Under these conditions, is a sufficient degree of separation and self-exclusion possible? It all depends on the particular circumstances. The world market itself is a powerful force for separation and exclusion, generating in the conurbation and even more in the rural environment a space of demonetized informal economy that the crises are helping to further develop. Furthermore, discreet forms of sabotage of labor such as absenteeism are becoming generalized. Can a high enough level of cultural and political autonomy be achieved within this latter framework, however? Can it really be the site of the formation of the revolutionary subject? It is the community in struggle that is recomposed as the subject, but not all at once. For a certain period of time it is only potentially a community, because although urban struggles can cause it to emerge, they do not yet exist on a sufficient scale to consolidate it. During this period the urban struggle is the embryonic class struggle; a class in the process of formation confronts another that is already formed. In order for the subject to completely affirm itself, it must separate itself from capitalist relations and construct its autonomy, and the latter must be reflected in counter-institutions. This is impossible unless it spreads throughout the territory. The separation process as it affects labor and culture must merge with a process of territorial separation. The refusal of wage labor and the spectacle cannot really be effective without the withdrawal from the market of extensive pieces of territory. At the beginning, freedom is erected on agricultural foundations.

An urban struggle that seeks to be authentic without liberating its own space will remain abstract. The struggle that does

not produce its own space will not endure; it will fail from the moment of its creation and end up as a ghetto. It does not change life, but only ideology. It does not create new institutions, or experiment with new architectural forms, or conceive of a liberating urbanism. It will be manifested in minor scuffles over mobbing, expropriations, urban development, evictions, corruption scandals, biased planning, video-surveillance, municipal statutes, etc., but it will not draw the conclusions, it will not question urban society as a whole and strive to bring about a different social model. It will not forge a collective subject, since only conscious struggles can do that. An urban struggle is effective only if it is capable of bringing together a community of individuals who manage to conduct their everyday lives outside of capitalist imperatives. The market quickly recovers lost terrain, which is why the struggle must be prolonged by unleashing conflicts, which is not very difficult, considering the plans for “urban renewal” and the museumification of towns and cities (redevelopment, infrastructure, rehabilitation, reconstruction, modernization) and constant urban highway and transport infrastructure projects (traffic circles, tunnels, overpasses, bypasses, access roads, extensions and excavations). The urban struggle is a movement of resistance against putting a price-tag on the soil and the accumulation of real estate profits, a barrier against discriminatory redevelopment, pretentious and exhibitionist phallic architecture, administrative authoritarianism ... in short, it is a battlefield in the war against the space or the world of the commodity. It has to forge a plan and offer an alternative model to urban society, one that is decentralizing and communitarian, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the informal economy and developing a critique of capitalist architecture and urbanism, but this requires resources that it does not possess. In order to overcome its theoretical-practical fragility it must find allies on other fronts, a goal that leads towards the defense of territory. The liberation of urban space requires a free territory.