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Après-Coup, Milan: *The City of the Future*

Round table: *To Be and Not To Be: Identity Today*

November 24, 2018

The title of this conference goes back to a famous Gramscian formula: that of the city of the future. The city of the future is a non-existent city, one which is not yet there, but one which will be. This presupposes two things: the first, that a human group identified by the noun “city” will exist, which is by no means certain; the second, that the adjective “future” carries a positive connotation. We may even say that this adjective conveys a hope, an almost messianic, “Benjaminian” hope.

Both assumptions are rooted in a dual aspect legitimizing them: a narrative or an urge which provides them with a formal framework, and faith in them. I insist on this term, however religious its overtone. Gramsci was a Marxist. Gorki and Lenin, when they met on Capri, thought that Marxism should be understood as an “atheist religion.”

The city of the future aims, or rather, aimed to unite heaven and earth, the ideal and the real. It longed to reconcile the two cities Augustine alluded to: the city of God, that is to say the city of salvation and grace, and the earthly city. It reconciled and combined them.

A different perspective underlay the whole construction of this city, no matter how imaginary it was. It represented a positive leap, a utopian movement, utopian both in the sense of a “nowhere land” and, above all, in the sense of a “good place.” And the time providing a rhythm to the life of people who believed in it was the time which was going to happen, a near future about to take place. Like the New Jerusalem of the book of Revelation, the city of the future would finally establish the kingdom of justice and, why not, the kingdom of happiness, as theorized by the most revolutionary Romantics.

An illusion, in the Freudian sense of the term? Perhaps, in a way. In any case, believing in the city of the future meant working for it, and this implied an identification with a project, with something that lay ahead, not behind. This meant that the identification had a deadline: it was an instrument, not a goal. It was a perspective that presupposed a risk, a bet. Of all bets, the riskiest, since a city is a... city.

I hereby emphasize what can be understood by the word city. I am going to show its negative features, that is to say what a city is not or should not be. A city is not a family, nor is it even a group. A family implies a bond of blood, which may be more or less incestuous, while a group has a narcissistic fixation that inevitably exalts what is either familiar or similar. A city embeds its opposite, since its core is a bond alien both to family and group. From this point of view, it implies or should imply something less rather than something more of that ambiguous satisfaction which both the family and the group of similar beings share.

For this reason, the city is politics as we understand it. It is because the city requires a bond that does not converge to fuse with the identical. Rather, a loss is necessary here to turn the stranger, the alien, into its foundation. This is clearly a difficult question. Through its recourse to the ideal, the Utopian way aims to make up for that loss which the city has established as the mode of living together. Yet, in the absence of a utopian perspective, is it possible to take this loss into account and avoid that which a prevalence of the family and the group has enforced as sheer enjoyment, thus depriving the city of what should characterize it?

In his *Politics*, Aristotle reminds us that the goal of the city is to live according to the moral good. Men, he says, unite and keep together the political community, in other words the city, as they wish to live. Indeed, living is in itself good. Yet can this be enough today? Now, the very fact of being alive suggests the idea of simple existence. Benjamin would have adopted the phrase “naked life,” that is to say, what remains of life once justice toward life has been achieved. I here suggest an idea of futurity, a wish, an intimation of tomorrow. I have the future generations in mind and what we will bequeath to them.

The “mere fact of being alive” reduces life to survival. Nowadays this sort of life is not at all neutral. Indeed, it may well be the new shape of politics limiting itself to ratifying a sort of distribution among the enjoyment economies and their respective identities. This may be a perfect synthesis of family and group, intimately joined together and as such untouchable. All should have their share of enjoyment, as Sciascia would say. Isn't this the freedom that the market requires?

A certain unwieldy, exasperated, and non-critical interpretation of subjectivity has turned it into a synonym of disguised subjectivism, thus foreclosing the question: What can underlie a vital link of coexistence and make a city habitable? The mystic void of alterity has done the rest.

That has left the question of what is common unresolved, as if the city of the future had no human content, no content that could be represented as human, but only a technological delirium, that of a hyper-robotized city which may stand as a new version of the famous painting exhibited in Urbino, "The Ideal City." Everything is perfect, but the city is uninhabited....

I am going to make two observations. The first is this: the symptomatic absence of thought about the city of the future has its correlation in the emphasis on particular interests. Identity is called upon to confirm ongoing enjoyment, a plus of being which does not bear the minus set by the city. In this sense, as I have noticed in my practice, identity often appears as self-celebration advocating its own advent. It is the aspiration to a name that asks only to be protected in its economy of satisfaction. It is a false coin shown and circulated in the hypocritical theatre of social communication. Pluralism has often been elevated to an excuse for rejecting all encounter, since similar beings can understand only each other, as narcissism has shown. In this way all particularism cultivates the potential for a universalism, that is to say, an authoritarianism which is hardly kept in check and which aims to generate an effect of fragmentation of all social logics, comparison, and exchange. Adherence to the norm is dropped, which is the ambition of all particularism aiming to reject the unity of human experience. As a matter of fact, the acknowledgement of that unity accounts for the subjective division and the independent existence of the unconscious, where particularism represents the rejection of division, the choice to overcome division in the exaltation of the Ego, thus advocating one's enjoyment, often taking on the attitude of the victim. Hence what Marx called the "pompous catalogue of human rights," which in his *Capital* he suggested should be replaced by a "modest Magna Carta."

The second observation is this: it is interesting to note the role of a cultural deviation, that is to say a projection and extension, in social terms, of a mode of satisfaction shared by several groups of people. It is necessary here to note that culture in this sense is no equivalent to civilization, as Huntington (author of the famous *Clash of Civilizations*) assumed. What I am trying to say is that all conduct, though necessarily cultural conduct, does not have to be civil conduct. A market logic promotes culture, favors it and adapts to it. It is a form of translation of tolerance, not in the noble sense in which Voltaire understands it, but rather in that form criticized by Marcuse. In other words, "do and enjoy as you like; what really matters is that your enjoyment does not trespass on mine." In this sense it is

possible to grasp the way in which the process of segregation is really determined. That process does not only circumscribe areas of marginalization where economic power is strongest, but also establishes and boosts a strategy of self-segregation which cultivates and protects its own identity as a mark of satisfaction.

Such a scenario threatens to force the city to renounce itself, to renounce what it should be as a place for meetings and contamination, a place which keeps in check the ghost of fusion and becomes a space for the distribution of enjoyments among its inhabitants, in the hope that one's enjoyment won't not clash with other people's enjoyment. What happened in Yugoslavia after Tito's regime – a mere 400-odd km away from here – exemplifies this. The market, or, if you like, the discourse of the capitalist, has replaced the ideal and the religious echo inhabiting it. What are we to do? The Freudian discomfort with civilizations emerges as that of an anguished civilization, a suffering civilization.

Today's task is to face this question and try to answer it.

The issue of the city is the issue of a link, while the issue of the link is the issue of politics, and the issue of politics is, I believe, the issue of utopia. The noble example set by the Greeks – I am thinking of the invention of tragedy – may be an indication, a paradigm, the intuition of a lucid awareness, that it was necessary to try and do something in an attempt to deal with a double loss: the loss of the Other, in the service of the ideal, which upheld the city of the future, and a loss of enjoyment, which requires us to face the unfamiliar, the non-similar.

Will we make it, or shall we turn politics into a market within the market?

The air of the city makes us free, or so people would say; is it still like this today? It is the 40th anniversary of Law 180. When Basaglia opened the gates of mental asylums, he thanked above all the city of Trieste, which had made this possible. Last month I took part in a conference on this topic. There were psychoanalysts, psychologists, psychiatrists, and neuropsychiatrists. As expected, they all agreed. Could they take any other position? Is there anyone who would like to reopen those horrible madhouses? Days ago a mother came to an interview with me with her 10-year-old son who apparently is unable to read, write and do sums. She gave me his diagnosis to help me understand his condition. The doctor who wrote the diagnosis had taken part in the conference on Basaglia. The woman told me they had taken six months to write the diagnosis. If she had had to wait for an appointment with the local neuropsychiatry department, they would have had to wait for a whole year. The paper was filled with numbers, references to tests,

acronyms, and every now and again, an English word to provide a tone of objectivity. There was even a table, yet not a single sentence, not one that said something about this little boy, about what he thought.... He was probably not asked any questions about his past, etc. Yet, thanks to this diagnosis, he will be entitled to all possible tools of support, and to an educator. He has an identity, his own object, a definite economy of his own.... I'll stop here.

Post scriptum: a) criticizing the logic and ideology of the market is all too easy. You can say anything and its opposite. What is more, the ideology of the market cultivates the very rhetoric of transgression. It takes up and recycles everything, more than the inhabitants of Frankfurt could ever imagine, and criticism turns into useless snobbery. b) Fighting it is rather easy, since no one will ever answer. We almost miss the good old capitalists, who were stout, wore a waistcoat and smoked a cigar, with a top hat on their head. The anonymity of the market accounts for its perception of impending doom. c) Perhaps we do not need new theories, but rather new practices that account for possible links, for human bonds.