

MEDITERRANEAN CITIES, NEO-LIBERAL DRIFT AND REVOLTS

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Preliminary remarks

This text is the introduction of the book Mediterranean Cities and Neo-Liberal Drift, edited by the author, published in Italian by Mesogea, Messina in September 2011. The book describes the most important changes that occurred in the last twenty years until 2010 in Istanbul, Beyrouth, Tanager, Tunis, Alger, Barcelona, Marseille, Genoa and Naples.

In all historical epochs the consequences of great social transformations manifest themselves most dramatically in the cities. The “second great transformation” that was sparked during the Seventies, i.e., the so called neo-liberal economic revolution and its globalization¹ was responsible for changes running as deep as those occurring in Europe during the industrial revolution between the XVIII and the XIX centuries. Such changes included mass urbanization, the disruption of urban configurations, epidemics, constant revolts and revolutions.

As the process of neo-liberal transformation accelerates in cities, it promotes amnesia and wipes out social memory, and not only among the youth. In his films, Ken Loach describes the collapse of English industrial society; movies like Blade Runner portray a tragic picture of American urban society in its process of becoming, bearing a stark resemblance to the Los Angeles described by Mike Davis.

Few people remember the great mobilizations of workers and students of the 60s and 70s or many other social struggles, e.g., over housing. Their sizes are in stark contrast with today’s difficulty in achieving social aggregation, collective unity and political action, in spite of the success of recent demonstrations resisting the results of neo-liberal policies. Social conflict always materializes in cities because it ultimately has to do with the right of citizenships, a right that has been almost completely erased by neo-liberalism. Processes of reducing the power of city dwellers in Italy, as well as industrial decline which is replaced by a kind of segmented and heterogeneous submersion of manufacturing in the local social networks or family relationships with its proliferation of piecework at home, gang masters, chains of subcontractors, and finally the total dismantling of previous social and economic structures, The above elements describe the rise of a semi submerged and a total submerged or informal economy that caused the enslavement of ever increasing millions of people, including children and the elderly.

¹ In order to avoid terminological misunderstandings, let me clarify that by “second great transformation” I mean the changes set in motion in the 1970s, i.e. the upheaval in economic, social, political and cultural structures caused by three revolutions: the technological revolution, including computers, communication and transportation; the financial revolution, and the political revolution (meaning the accentuation of asymmetry in political, military-police, and administrative power). As in previous historical periods, globalization is nothing more than the expansion on a world scale of this process dominated by neo-conservative liberalization, which is in fact antithetical to the democratic liberalism theorized by Schumpeter, Polanyi, Keynes, Galbraith and practiced in Italy by Adriano Olivetti (as opposed to the Agnelli family and others who have always placed their bets on wars, super-exploitation and authoritarianism).

In many of these areas Italians would be later replaced by immigrants while at the same time manufacturing would be outsourced to North Africa, to East Europe and even to Asia and Africa. The changes above marked the triumph of submerged, “postmodern” economies causing the proliferation everywhere.

This “second great transformation” of economic relations is mainly responsible for the growing demand for new individuals who can be enslaved, i.e., immigrants to be relegated to a new legally precarious status, or worse yet to the status of a non person, devoid of rights. This is how the “postmodern” economic boom came to be, with its reliance on the multiplication of uncontrolled interweaving of legal, illegal and criminal activities in all fields, construction speculation, corruption, tax evasion, pollution, and security based citizen mobilizations. Such mobilizations ignore a tragic lack of safety in the work places and in the dwellings of marginalized sectors of the population while insisting on the submission of the newly enslaved based on ethnicity.

This model of development tends to destroy any economic, social, political and cultural configuration that fails to conform to the neo-liberal model. It creates mostly ephemeral products destined to ensure ever increasing profits and ignores posterity, i.e., the future. It treats young people who refuse to conform to the neo-liberal credo as “inconvenient posterity” or “the dregs of society”. Under neo-liberal management, expenditures of the political organization of society are to be allocated mostly for the privatization and maximization of profits to the detriment of the res publica and the future (suffice it to think of the management of the national health system, public works, transportation as well as the general attacks against the public sector, resulting in raids against utilities, waste management, public instruction, university and research).

This is the neo-liberal model exported all over the world by the neoconservative managers of globalization, especially in medium and large cities. The outcome is a tendency towards homologation (uniformity) achieved through semi-standardized operations that rarely encounter any social and political opposition. The lack of energetic response is due to the erosion of collective action, the weakness of trade unions, and the almost complete disappearance of the left and truly democratic liberals.

The Neo-liberal City

Today it is impossible to find specific features that set cities of one continent apart from those of the others. The uniformity of architectural design and materials commonly used in construction are among the factors that intensify this homologation, along with the discourses on the “postmodern” city. These discourses emphasize the cult of decorum, morality and hygiene, all encompassed within an obsessive demand for security, making today’s cities similar to the cities of European colonialists. Whoever visits the different cities on the Mediterranean sea will find more or less the same architectural innovations and city planning features typical of European or North American cities, i.e., big Plexiglas skyscrapers, large parking lots or structures, new subway and light-rail systems, “postmodern” fortified districts (like the gated communities), camera surveillance everywhere, an ever increasing number of public and private guards and police, the obsessive presence of screens offering advertising or scaffolding used as billboards that are intentionally kept well after the facades have been refurbished for the sake of continuing advertising, new large public works or “installations” that aim to be ever more shocking, malls and shopping centers, boutique, bars, restaurants, multi-screen cinemas, discotheques, pubs and self-service restaurants, often built as a photocopy of existing ones. Everywhere we observe the same environment which atomizes and practically reduces city dwellers to robots who can circulate only if they have money in their pockets or, better yet, an international credit card.

Everyone expresses his/her enjoyment with trivial, superficial insights worthy of barstool sociology, observations that tend to be blind to the situation of the youth, those working in temporary positions or under the table, and the new slaves who are buried in kitchens or working underground (as in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or *Le Roi et l'oiseau* by Grimault and Prevert). This is also reinforced by the fact that labour is often hidden in the outskirts of cities. This section of city dwellers is totally ignored in the polls, those costly tools that aim at investigating their victimization or their needs but then are confined to interviewing only owners of a landline, i.e., relatively well-to-do residents. Every city feeds on its "shadows", outskirts and slums while producing human surplus, i.e., former humans who are too worn out or who have not had the ability or chance to adapt. Those who have dared to rebel, the "dregs of society" such as the Roma or the undocumented workers who have resorted to burrowing in tunnels in the outskirts of cities (for example, in the interstices under the frontage roads or the highways or in the sewers) are even more disregarded. The great transformations that took place in cities like Barcelona, Marseille, Genoa, Istanbul, Athens, and now again in Port Said, Tangiers, Casablanca, Rabat and... Milan; those transformations are now accomplished through the organization of big events, as has actually been happening for a few decades in every city of the world. It has been accomplished through the Colombiads, the World Expo, the Olympics, trade shows, festivals, by declaring a city the "European capital of culture" and so forth with increasing numbers of sensationally staged events, which by definition must be grandiose and international, with a component of artistic and cultural allure, or better yet, multicultural and democratic attractions. The game of financial speculation, woven together with real estate speculation and the unregulated intersection of legal, under the table and criminal activity, and now neo-enslavement, repeats itself as in a photocopy. Its elements include: big media and political ballyhoo, stock market launching, famous architects and city planners (often left leaning ones) battling it out with each other, throngs of real and fake companies vying for contracts. The destruction begins along with devastation, pollution, the sprouting of a few skyscrapers or mega-structures eventually in the name of postmodern architecture and city planning that are supposedly "sustainable and respectful of human rights". To go along with this program, all you have to do is close your eyes to the multiple sub-contracting, the degradation of the suburbs and the various indirect consequences, including the awful quality of construction materials and the unsafe character of recent construction. It is shocking to recognize how similar these operations are to one another in all European and Mediterranean cities. For example, one can see on the Internet that the towers designed for Tunis are very similar to those designed for the Milan Expo or to those designed by "archistars"² for that matter. It seems that Berlusconi, Berisha, Ben Ali, Qaddafi and Putin have agreed on similar financial-real estate operations that are consistent with a neo-liberal model of privatization of the foreign policy of their respective countries³.

² The category of "archstars" deserve a fun but also sad pamphlet. As known, they are a few famous architects, each one is in fact a transnational corporation, with offices of their offices (or "factories"), as well as various real estate properties, in major cities around the world. Their projects and most famous works (or monstrosities) are building everywhere especially in the last forty years (from the Pompidou Centre to the towers in the UAE and several countries). See Gabriella Lo Ricco, Silvia Micheli, *Lo spettacolo dell'architettura. Profilo dell'archistar*©, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2003; F. La Cecla, *Against Architecture*, PM Press/Green Arcade, 2011.

³ In this regard, one of the most emblematic cases revealed by Wikileaks concerns the huge quantities of monumental construction projects built in Turkmenistan by the French group Bouygues which, according to *Le Monde*, turned that country into its paradise – at least for a few years- thanks to the greediness of the hermetic, sultan-like dictatorship ruling over it." In his book *Turkmenistan*, edizioni CNRS, 2010, Jean-Baptiste Jeangene Vilmer explains that Bouygues and its competing Turkish group Polimeks share almost all the big construction

In this context, all the cities on the Mediterranean have increasingly become places of immigration, emigration, transit of human beings of every type (including the various types of tourism, commuters, shopping trips or business travel). But at the same time, proliferating everywhere is the tendency towards protectionism, prohibitionism and criminalizing the enemy of the day, including the Roma and immigrants, and all other marginalized sectors of the population. Postmodern cities are in fact revolving doors through which the “good” can be selected and the “others” can be “consumed” and then expelled. In reality, integration, rejection, exclusion, divisions based on ethnicity and race coexist everywhere. Cities become a hybrid in which aspects of the past coexist with new transformations within dynamics that reduce the political organization of a society to a sort of management characterized more by violence than peacefulness, based on power being increasingly asymmetric, and a deepening polarization in profit and wealth distribution. Transportation, health, education, universities, research, security, social services, prisons, housing, urban development, public administration, crisis and “natural” catastrophe management, media: all these sectors are forced to adapt to a managerial logic aimed at maximizing profits to the detriment of the weakest sectors of society. The game of amplifying fears and insecurities unleashed by this type of development is configured as a “total political fact” of “postmodernity” thus manufacturing consent for the violent management of social disorder, i.e. for zero tolerance. This eliminates effective prevention and social recovery in favour solely of repression and penalization. The logic of war has become pervasive, whether it be war against terrorism or undocumented workers, war to make cities safe or war against graffiti and other “urban incivilities”. What passes for “governance” has become a petty management of urban society which may even provide jobs to some left leaning or anti-globalization artists, intellectuals, city planners and architects. It may even employ ecologists, garden guerrillas, or some graffiti or street artists who have gained a certain measure of fame. Such “governance” may even approve of wall gardens or creative people who have come up with such apparently original solutions while ignoring the expansion of submerged economies that have come to strongly resemble neo-slavery, or the expansion of security as a business and zero tolerance. The post-modern city may sparkle, may appear to be a place of freedom (for the rich and those in a dominant position), but as proved by the repressive events that transpired during the G 8 summit meeting in G enoa in 2001, the post-modern city is indeed ferocious against those who have no place in this new neo-liberal frame. These include, for example, the earthquake victims of L’Aquila who insist on not understanding what a stroke of genius the “new towns” proposed by Berlusconi are, or those obstinate Sardinian shepherds who are not resigned to becoming extinct . Until 1990, the citizens of North African countries did not need a visa to travel in Italy and there were intensive relations and exchanges between the northern and the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Today in fact the southern shore has been pushed towards the Arab countries, the East, the Orient (China) and the United States. Where does the future lie? In Port Said? In Tangiers or in Naples, Venice, G enoa, Barcelona, Marseille or Milan? What scenario can we expect on the economic and political horizon of the E uro-Mediterranean space? How should one interpret the

projects in Turkmenistan, without bids, to build real estate projects that are never used. In a telegram of the US Embassy it is noted that “corruption and nepotism remain the problems of Turkmenistan and that Turkish group and Bouygues were particularly successful in such a lucrative industry as construction because they mastered the local business environment”. See http://www.lemonde.fr/documents-wikileaks/article/2010/12/12/wikileaks-le-paradis-turkmene-de-bouygues_1452460_1446239.html. There are clear analogies between the above and the so-called P3 shadow government in Italy (2011) and the promoters of big public works scams who were indicted on July 2010, and the same could be said for other known and unknown occurrences in other countries. Non creative destruction and useless or ephemeral constructions everywhere have become one of the most profitable sectors of the neo-liberal economy on a local, national and world scale.

Palidda, *Mobilità umana*, op. cit., p. 155

unexpected fact that in less than two years the harbours of Tangiers and Port Said have become the most important ports in the Mediterranean, while those on the Northern shore seem to be languishing? What can we make of Istanbul, a city whose population is approaching 15 million (it quadrupled over a few years) while Genoa is going back to the same population it had in 1921? What can we say about Genoa and Marseille, two cities that with uneven results are attempting to turn themselves into tourist and services centers, while cities and transportation in Morocco, in Tunisia and elsewhere are undergoing an incredibly rapid modernization and improvement in quality (suffice it to think that high speed trains will connect Tangiers to Casablanca and to Marrakech...)? What does Europe produce as it becomes entrenched in a kind of protectionism accompanied by an often racist Eurocentrism, while in fact expanding to the East as opposed to other countries of the Mediterranean? And what can be said of the Union for the Mediterranean (UpM) which seems to be a hopeless, empty slogan, an almost surreal paradox compared to a process of construction of the European Union, which should logically include all countries on the Mediterranean hence being Euro-Mediterranean rather than just Eurocentric?

Perhaps these questions may appear naïve and rhetorical, as may seem for the demand for universal rights in opposition to the growing violence brought on by the champions of North and South fundamentalism with a pseudo religious cover or simply by militaristic fanatics or followers of the business of war in all fields and at any cost. Not to speak of the pettiness of local politicians devoted to local wars against the Roma people, immigrants or mosques who suddenly sing the praises of hygiene, morality, decorum and zero tolerance. They fail to realize that they are managing decline on behalf of the greediness of strong actors, leaving behind only scorched earth punctuated by new “towers” that perhaps won’t be standing for too long. Does it make any sense to be building new skyscrapers for the Expo in Milan 50 years after the building of Pirelli skyscraper? What will happen to “postmodern development” considering that the native population is growing older by leaps and bounds and shows no intention of leaving room for the future, exacerbating its racism towards those who at the moment are forced to live like slaves and even conduct their social life in hiding? How much corruption and violence, how many abuses will the neo-liberal revolution generate in the cities? But well beyond these concerns, the circles of power of all the great metropolis, together with their experts, show no signs of putting a stop to their paradoxical promotion of ever richer and attractive cities for the international middle classes, the so-called city users, the creative classes, a set of post mass tourists otherwise known as “serious tourists” even while proposing a new population increase. These two factors are antithetical today precisely because the concept of a city that is “safe” for the middle classes and tourists relies on the social exclusion of the lower classes even through violent means.

Resistance & Possible Futures

Over the past few years there have been evident signs of failure of the neo-conservative revolution as shown in the financial collapse and in its incapacity to propose reasonable and solid alternatives to economic trends that have no future. It is likely that the neo-conservative free trade economists will insist on treading water and will lash out as they desperately hold on to their positions of power causing additional human and material disasters. Will the resistance to neo-liberalism succeed in doing more than just survive and stand there licking its wounds? It is certainly difficult, but the only hope lies in people getting together to build a space for collective action, especially the victims of the submerged economies. There have been some encouraging signs in that direction, mature expressions of a capacity to maintain a critical stance in the face of a dominant discourse obsessed with growth and consumerism. This resistance is not carried on by small groups of people “who have dropped out from the world” but rather represents an ever spreading critical awareness of the need for “a fair and sustainable development” which turns into the ability to govern a “wise de-

growth". An example of this new movement that deserves attention is taking place in Totnes, a small town of 8000 people in the south west of England. It is what has been called a Transition town, i.e., a project designed and practiced as a grassroots effort by people who, home after home, street after street, have joined in to make it a reality. Since the project has been in place, families have been able to save a lot of money without giving up building very comfortable, high quality homes for themselves. They were also always able to guarantee efficient, clean public transportation that is affordable or even at zero cost. This type of experiments is not becoming generalized because it runs opposite to the interests and worldviews of the powers that be and their experts (social scientists, architects, etc.), with their obsession with growth through a rush to consumption, waste, financial and real-estate speculation. There are other positive experiences that deserve to be known and propangandate, for example the experience of Hamburg, which has become European Green Capital 2011 (<http://hamburggreencapital.eu>) through an extraordinary transformation under way for decades, especially with the active participation of majority of inhabitants. Unfortunately, now this experience is likely to fail; once again, the financial games seem to prevent a equity and solidarity perspective.

The practice of parrhesia advocated by Foucault in his later works, appears to be ever more needed as the first step in critical ability and therefore the social construction of alternatives that can be truly put into place. And it is perhaps this attitude of "speaking truth to power" that inspires the living practices of the zerozero generation, especially the youth rebellions that exploded at the end of 2010 in London as well as in Algeria, Tunisia, Italy and other countries and perhaps soon enough all over Europe.
