Authoritarianism and the Built Environment in Three Acts:

Irrationality and Social Freedom

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Prologue: Urban Space as the Material Expression of Capitalism

Historically, the constitution of urban space as we know it today has undergone various changes regarding its configuration and the very understanding of what it would be in practical and material terms. It is also true that what we identify as contemporary urban space has not always shared the same configuration across different societies and cultures. However, the dominant hegemony of the capitalist system, particularly between Europe and North America, brings with it a model of what would become a standardized way of life, highly adapted to this economic form.

In general, capitalism primarily operates through commercial exchanges based on a system that seeks its self-maintenance and profit conservation. Historically, cities were formed with the same purpose. Beyond their self-preservation, cities are the spaces where commercial exchanges take place, whether through the exploitation of natural resources within a specific territory or the utilization of a population's labor force. Consequently, commercial activity creates needs such as housing and general services to ensure life can be lived in a minimally viable way.

Within a certain notion of capitalist economic development, there arises a need for a complexity in urban structures, such as the circulation of people and goods through transportation systems, healthcare and sanitation systems to control diseases within cities, education systems to ensure the workforce can meet increasingly specialized needs, and so on.

Let us recall Edward Glaeser’s description of cities. He presents a highly machinistic notion of urban space, where, quite clearly, the city is seen as the site of production. The concentration of people in a particular space could favor productivity, considering important

aspects aimed at maximizing the circulation of capital (Glaeser, 2011, p.37). As a result, urban space becomes the location for economic development through interconnected sectors, much like the functioning of a machine (Glaeser, 2011, p.159).

From this initial argument, it is safe to say that urban space is one of the primary locations where capitalism is realized. The concept of the city is inseparable from the basic functioning of the capitalist system. In essence, there is no capitalism without a city. And just as in its theoretical and philosophical conception, the city functions to guarantee a certain progress that aims for capital accumulation, the preservation of the means of production, and the full realization of labor within a specific spatial control that employs laws, police or military force, and, above all, a dominant capital ideology applied to urban space.

Act I: Rationality as a Hegemonic Way of Life

Bataille and the (Productive) Homogeneous Society

As an argumentative foundation for this text, it is necessary to use psychological categories to better understand certain social structures that are consequently reflected in the cities. The thought of Bataille, intersecting psychoanalysis and society, seems to be a good path, offering some clues about how the capitalist urban space functions.

For Bataille, society can be largely categorized as homogeneous. Homogeneity here can be considered as everything that encompasses human relations governed by laws, fixed rules, measurability, a certain principle of stability, and the identification of individuals within a

relatively neutral space where any form of excess and violence is excluded from its constitution (Bataille & Lovitt, 1979, p.64).

It is also correct to assert that the homogeneous society is the society of labor and production. Any form of social relation is based on a principle of utility, which operates through calculations grounded in economic relationships (Bataille & Lovitt, 1979, p.65). In other words, the homogeneous society is driven by capital, and as a form of self-preservation, it considers everything that escapes the notion of utility and functionality to be alien. These principles are primarily marked by those who control the means of production, where, through the homogenization of the social fabric, the perpetuation of production itself and profit becomes possible (Bataille & Lovitt, 1979, p.65).

The city is organized through a set of laws that regulate its functioning. The territory is subject, among many things, to a logic of legality, which has as its principle the preservation of individual interests, especially private property. Its zoning systems, land parceling, and urban expansion models work following the same economic utility calculation mentioned by Bataille. The plots of land are subjected to arbitrary classifications based on real estate speculation interests or to establish privileged access to nature. The land thus becomes subject to a price logic, simultaneously becoming a battleground for conflicting interests. The urban space is, in turn, the ultimate expression of the ordering of ordinary life and the maximization of functionality so that the production of goods and their circulation can be optimized. The physical structure of the city reflects the structure of the homogeneous capitalist society.

Loss and the Mobilization of Moral and Psychological Categories

Function is a crucial concept for understanding how social homogenization is structured in urban space. Not coincidentally, capitalism largely relies on the relationship between functionality and the built space, which was widely disseminated in the modernist movement in the early 20th century (a movement that produced lasting reflections in architecture to this day). The modernist ideal of resolving social conflicts through the total reconfiguration of cities via industrialization also had the goal of achieving aesthetic visual standardization, known as the International Style[1].

A famous 1908 text by architect and theorist Adolf Loos, titled "Ornament and Crime," succinctly summarizes the relationship and sentiment of the modernist movement regarding architectural and economic production of the time. The argument is structured to justify functionality and the absence of ornamentation on two fronts: moral and psychological.

Consistently, Loos attributes a sense of archaicness and even degeneracy to ornamentation in architecture and art. Not surprisingly, ornamentation is linked to a form of erotism[2], seen as a moral degradation and cognitive delay (Loos, 1913, p.21). Bataille revisits the association of erotism as a form of inferior and peripheral life in several texts, which will be addressed later.

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[1] Architectural movement in the early 20th century characterized by a universalist language focused on utility and functionality. It was also marked by the rejection of local or historical styles.

[2] Concept of erotism for Georges Bataille, associated with the notion of transgression, the breaking of the boundaries of rationality—everything that escapes the order of utility, production, and moves toward the unknown and excess.

Loos defends minimalism and functionality as a superior form of rationality, a society that prioritizes economy and efficiency. Ornamentation[3], in turn, is portrayed as an epidemic, uncultured, and backward way of life (Loos, 1913, p.22). Frequently, expressions such as "waste," "output," and "work time" are used, mobilizing moral categories and showing the utilitarian bias at the core of modernism's action.

Finally, Loos characterizes the modern ornamentist as a "pathological phenomenon," thus mobilizing a psychological category. He identifies individuals as unfit and irrational within a certain notion of what would be socially acceptable. Therefore, Loos positions the modern subject as a superior form of rationality, primarily based on the ability to comprehend functionality, industrialization, profit maximization, and work optimization in society.

Act II: Irrationality as Social Pathology

Le Bon and the Forms of Social Regression

The 19th century in Europe was marked by major revolutions that led to structural social changes, which in turn shaped the course of the Western world in the 20th century. These social upheavals sparked a very specific stance in defense of order by a certain conservative sector of social psychology, particularly regarding the psychology of crowds. Within French thought, without a doubt, the most significant phenomenon discussed was the French Revolution, particularly the Paris Commune.

[3] Ornamentation in architecture refers to the use of decorative elements aimed at beautifying and bringing cultural, historical, symbolic, or aesthetic meaning to built structures.

The psychologist and researcher Gustave Le Bon addresses the theme in an effort to understand the difference between the psychology of the individual and that of crowds. According to him, in that context, crowds were characterized by their emergence as a social actor with a high potential for destruction (Le Bon, 1895, p.5). Marked by notions of grandeur and violence, crowds challenged the centralized power of the State.

According to Le Bon, crowds possess psychological characteristics marked by the disappearance of individuality and the dominance of unconscious actions. This leads to the absence of cerebral life, a decrease in intelligence, and a transformation of feelings, which can easily turn heroic or criminal (Le Bon, 1895, p.9).

In a certain parallel with Adolf Loos's thinking, Le Bon offers another characterization of crowd behavior, which, according to him, is marked by notions of exaggeration and oversimplification—here, it is important to differentiate simplification from the simplicity of forms marked by the modernist movement. It is also marked by actions oscillating between doubt and uncertainty, and according to Le Bon, a behavior akin to that of women, who immediately swing to extremes (Le Bon, 1895, p.21).

Early in Chapter III of *The Psychology of Crowds*, Le Bon presents some classifications about the functioning of crowd reasoning, which, according to him, are marked by a regressive form of thought. Crowds reason through simplistic and imprecise imagistic associations, such as: “Esquimaux who, knowing from experience that ice, a transparent body, melts in the mouth, concludes that glass, also a transparent body, should also melt in the mouth; or that of the savage who imagines that by eating the heart of a courageous foe he acquires his bravery; or of the

workman who, having been exploited by one employer of labor, immediately concludes that all employers exploit their men" (Le Bon, 1875, p.29).

The aggressive nature of the text towards marginalized groups in society is evident, for instance, in the use of stigmatizing terms such as "Eskimos", "savages," and the working class, associating them with some form of archaic, regressive, and irrational life. Similar to Loos in content, but applied to different situations, we can also see the mobilization of psychological and moral categories to confront everything that escapes the "normal" regiment of productive society. Anything that deviates from notions of order, stability, and organicity of form is classified as pathological.

It is also interesting to note that a key moment of the French Revolution was the transformation of the built space. The Bastille was seen as a symbol of absolute monarchical power, and its fall symbolized a modification of the influence that territory and architecture had over individuals. Prisons, along with other forms of social control, are part of maintaining the productive social structure, or as Bataille would say, the homogeneous society. Lower forms of heterogeneous life are subjected to exclusion and containment to prevent contamination of the non-pathological. Any classification of social pathologies serves the purpose of exclusion and the invisibilization of certain sectors of society.

Bataille and the Two Heterogeneous Topologies

Returning to Bataille's thought, the understanding of social totality is based on the principle of the existence of a heterogeneous society[4]. This is primarily understood through two different topologies: the sacred heterogeneous, which tends toward centralized power, purification, and transcendental value; and the erotic heterogeneous, which tends toward non-organicity, a certain form of promiscuity, and non-unity (Bataille & Lovitt, 1979, p.67).

Within a certain homogeneous normality in society, processes of social disidentification between individuals and sectors may occur, consequently questioning notions of social order and stability. A society in upheaval tends to break away from homogeneity towards heterogeneous positions, as previously mentioned.

First, erotic heterogeneity goes through processes of total rupture with what is established. Disidentification leads to actions that seek a process of disorganization, grounded in the estrangement of imposed order and its rational logics. Deformation is a constitutive characteristic of what Bataille classifies as erotism (Bataille, 1957, p.14). Here, notions of individuality are lost, based on the premise that the notion of the self is no longer present. Ultimately, we can classify the erotic experience as the inability to delimit between the self and the other, between the individual and the collective. There are no longer notions of valuation and exchange, and consequently, productive activities no longer make sense.

On another pole, I would like to explore more intensely the situation in which society tends toward sacred heterogeneity. Just as in erotism, the sacred alone does not serve the

[4] For Bataille, a heterogeneous society is marked by sectors that do not submit to the logic of production and utility, and are instead characterized by marginality. It can also be understood as the human dimension defined by excess, transgression, the sacred, death, erotism, and violence.

productive society. Now, not due to its low value, but because of its transcendent value, which lacks a common measure. It is within this framework that expressions of authoritarianism take shape through the sacred. This is what Bataille refers to as fascist heterogeneity (Bataille & Lovitt, 1979, p.80).

Fascism, therefore, draws on elements from a homogeneous society, such as production and labor, adding primarily two elements: religion and military power, with the latter being used on a large scale. The authoritarian figure utilizes the sacred as a way to purify society under the aegis of an almost divine power, facing the disordered and irrational threat of erotism. Still maintaining its heterogeneous character, fascism can be classified as a counterrevolutionary revolution.

Moving to the built space, fascism expresses itself materially by intensifying control relations to preserve (or intensify) the productive social logic. In response to erotism, we witness the intensification of spatial segregation between social classes through the creation of gated communities and the establishment of microcosms that no longer participate in the social life of the city. We see the emergence of the excessive verticalization of condominiums, often supported by the state, with housing prices that exceed reason, thus excluding much of the working class from access to housing. We see the use of hostile architecture in public spaces as a way to segregate space for those marginalized in society. We see police violence used to contain the circulation of certain individuals in urban space.

Fascism largely employs fear as a central emotion for mobilization and social control (Safatle, 2015, p.37). It is through fear and crises that capitalism intensifies through the use of violence and segregation. At the same time, in a society largely undergoing disidentification,

fascism becomes desirable. It finds a position of centralized power and moderation, and it is in the cities where structures of social control are applied.

Interlude: *Terpsícore* and Potlatch Against the Logic of Accumulation

The society of production has its grammar and modes of thought. If we take as truth the utilitarian logic of labor and profit as the guiding axis of this way of life, we can also assert that the homogeneous society is incapable of understanding and assimilating any form of action that is not based on the logic of utility.

A famous short story written by the Brazilian author Machado de Assis, titled "Terpsícore," tells the everyday life of a young working-class couple struggling with debt. At one point, they win the lottery, and the amount they win is more than enough to pay off their debts. And here lies the interesting aspect of the story at two key moments. The first is the immediate reaction of the couple: even with a large sum of money, they think within the logic of homogeneity. They decide to save the money and continue working in the same way, meaning that nothing changes, whether in times of abundance or scarcity. Later, due to the incoherence of the situation, they decide to spend all the money on an extravagant party full of excesses.

It is symptomatic to notice that, in general, the first decision of the couple feels completely normal to us, while the excessive spending, which Bataille calls *improductive expenditure* (Bataille, 1933, p.169), feels completely strange and incomprehensible. The idea of spending without a utilitarian purpose seems irrational to capitalism.

The difficulty in grasping *improductive expenditure* happens similarly in the Potlatch ceremonies of indigenous populations on the northwest coast of Canada and the United States. With the aim of celebrations or challenges, wealth was distributed among chiefs, family members, or rivals. Here, unlike the economic model based on barter or trade, the circulation of wealth does not stem from the need to acquire for accumulation but from the necessity of expenditure for other purposes (Bataille, 1933, p.171).

From 1885 to 1951, the Canadian government banned Potlatch ceremonies (Noakes, 2023). Once again, it becomes clear that certain devices (in this case, legal ones) were used to maintain the functioning of the homogeneous society. Classified as incomprehensible within the utilitarian logic, Potlatch suffered from erasure and exclusion, deemed an irrational practice.

Act III: Irrationality as Social Freedom

The Erotic Topology Against the Fascist Topology

As discussed earlier, fascist heterogeneity is positioned as a certain duality against erotic heterogeneity. More explanatorily, fascism enters as a combative response to erotism. In turn, it is also true that there is an explosive potential for combating fascism through erotism due to its characteristic of disrupting social structures.

The main question may lie in the inquiry: what happens when there is a process of popular disidentification? The mobilization through the authoritarian path is well-known and has been widely used throughout history. The defense of capitalism seems to occur not only with a

system of defense for the social body, but also sounds natural and obvious to us. At the same time, it is contradictory. Where does the fear of the opposite heterogeneity come from?

A good clue about this might lie in our hegemonic notion of freedom. To a large extent, we understand freedom through the Kantian concept of autonomy (Kant, 1785, p.33). It remains problematic that our notion of freedom is grounded in an idea of restriction, giving laws and limits to oneself. One can establish a parallel between Kantian freedom and the functioning of the individual in the homogeneous productive society. That is, only individuals capable of establishing laws for themselves are truly free and capable of circulating socially.

Against an authoritarian concept of freedom, there is an urgent need to seek a concept of freedom outside the legal framework. A freedom that is not bound by notions of restriction, repression, and formality. Inorganicness seems to be a constituent part of a truly emancipatory freedom. And indeed, it is true that, in the final instance, this freedom goes through the decentralization of the notion of the individual. More than just the inversion caused by decentering, meaning a freedom primarily collective, the dissolution of the individual goes through the idea of the total disorganization of what is known as homogeneity. This freedom closely resembles what Bataille classifies as erotism.

Erotism, primarily, can be classified as unproductive expenditure from the perspective of a homogeneous society. It can also be seen as the transgression of the limits imposed by the society of work and production. Ultimately, we can classify it as an inorganic and disform power that may provide a new perspective on freedom through that which cannot be controlled or predicted, as an absolute negation of capitalist rationality.

Epilogue: The Shapeless City

As a point of impasse, it is worth recalling the thoughts of philosophers Mark Fisher, Slavoj Žižek, and Fredric Jameson. From the perspective of a homogeneous society, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. And going further, it escapes capitalist rationality the notion of restraining its acceleration towards self-destruction. The hijacking of imagination is a constitutive part of homogeneity, so it is necessary to force estrangement through a new path. In other words, a new epistemology is needed to grasp forms of life outside of capitalism.

A practical example of this is the experience of CLTs (Community Land Trusts) in North America. In general, the idea is to subvert notions of property and land value to ensure affordable housing, sustainable land use, and protection against forms of real estate speculation. Beyond this characterization, CLTs exist within an entirely horizontal structure, where the community takes control of its relationship with the land. Removing housing from the logic of capital appears as something radically irrational (and heterogeneous) to the production-driven society. In capitalism, profit must be extracted from every form of existence.

As part of this exercise, it is also difficult to imagine a city outside the logic of production and conservation. For us, many times, the connection between traffic laws, zoning laws, land use laws, setbacks, building height regulations, land occupancy rates, codes of conduct, and police apparatus is inseparable. Living in a homogeneous society is living under the aegis of legal grammar.

It is important to remember that cities predate capitalism. Even in situations that Le Bon would classify as archaic societies, for example, cities worked very well based on a logic other

than production and accumulation. Cities supported not by notions of the individual and private property but by solidarity and by their end in themselves. What is considered irrational, in turn, had a full functioning through other means.

The incorporation of "regressive" social forms may have creative potential in the face of what is hegemonically imposed. Social disorganization can open a path where work and production no longer make sense and, thus, demand a collective effort for construction. If the logic of laws applied to urban space has as its goal the preservation of property and the increase of production, the abandonment of this legal apparatus could generate a new idea of the city.

The abandonment of the notion of private property in the city creates logical disorientation, generating a feeling of inorganicness. If we can no longer delimit plots based on a mathematical system applied to the monetary valuation of the land itself, the land is left with its primordial function of inhabiting it and using its physical properties to generate food and serve as a space for social relations.

By abandoning the need for domination and exploitation of territory, it no longer makes sense to view nature as something external to be subdued and dominated. Nature, in turn, would become something inherent to the existence of human beings. Our exterior view of what is conventionally called "nature" creates a colonial position par excellence. Finally, all the economic and legal paraphernalia would collapse, and the notion of formal control would lose its meaning.

It is interesting to note how a position opposed to economic progress sounds like a form of archaism. However, this exercise is urgent as a way to combat exploitation and the use of urban space as an arena for social conflicts. Erotic topology, through its disformity,

disorganization, and dispossession, points us toward a new form of sensibility. And only through new forms of sensibility can we think about the built space beyond homogeneous utility.

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