Metropolis

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Many years ago I was having a conversation with Guy (Debord) which I believed to be about political philosophy, until at some point Guy interrupted me and said: 'Look, I am not a philosopher, I am a strategist'. This statement struck me because I used to see him as a philosopher as I saw myself as one, but I think that what he meant to say was that every thought, however 'pure', general or abstract it tries to be, is always marked by historical and temporal signs and thus captured and somehow engaged in a strategy and urgency. I say this because my reflections will clearly be general and I won't enter into the specific theme of conflicts but I hope that they will bear the marks of a strategy.

I would like to start from a banal consideration on the etymology of the word metropolis. As you know, in Greek metropolis means Mother City and refers to the relationship between cities and colonies.The citizens of a *polis* who left to found a colony were curiously called *en apoikia:* distancing/drifting away from home and from the city, which then took on, in relation to the colony, the character of Mother City, Metropolis(1). As you know this meaning of the word is still current and today used to express the relationship of the metropolitan territory of the home to the colonies. The first instructive observation suggested by the etymology is that the word metropolis has a strong connotation of maximum dislocation and spatial and political dishomogeneity, as that which defines the relationship between the state, or the city, and colonies. And this raises a series of doubts about the current idea of the metropolis as a urban, continuum and relatively homogeneous fabric (2). This is the first consideraton: the isonomy that defines the Greek *polis* as a model of political city is excluded from the relation between metropolis and colony, and therefore the term metropolis, when transposed to describe a urban fabric, carries this fundamental dishomogeneity with it. So I propose that we keep the term metropolis for something substantially other from the city, in the traditional conception of the *polis*, i.e. something politically and spatially isonomic. I suggest to use this term, metropolis, to designate the new urban fabric that emerges in parallel with the processes of transformation that Michel Foucault defined as the shift from the territorial power of the ancient regime, of sovereignty, to modern biopower, that is in its essence governmental.

This means that to understand what a metropolis is one needs to understand the process whereby power progressively takes on the character of government of things and the living, or if you like of an economy. Economy means nothing but government, in the 18th century, the government of the living and things. The city of the feudal system of the ancient regime was always in a situation of exception in relation to the large territorial powers, it was the *citta franca*, relatively autonomous from the great territorial powers (3). So I would say that the metropolis is the dispositif or group of dispositifs that replaces the city when power becomes the government of the living and of things.

We cannot go into the complexity of the transformation of power into government. Government is not dominion and violence, it is a more compolecx configuration that traverses the very nature of the governed thus implying their fredom, it is a power that is not transcendental but immanent, its essential character is that it always is, in its specific manifestation, a collateral effect, something that originates in a general economy and falls onto the particular (4). When the US strategists speak of collateral damage they have to be taken literally: government always has this schema of a general economy, with collateral effects on the particulars, on the subjects.

Goind back to the metropolis, my idea is that we are not facing a process of development and growth of the old city, but the institution of a new paradigm whose character needs to be

analysed. Undoubtedly one of its main traits is that there is a shift form the model of the *polis* founded on a centre, that is, a public centre or *agora*, to a new metropolitan spatialisation that is certainly invested in a process of de-politicisation, which results in a strange zone where it is impossible to decide what is private and what is public.

Michel Foucault tried to define some of the essential characters of this urban space in relation to governmentality. According to him, there is a convergence of two paradigms that were hitherto distinct: leprosy and the plague. The paradigm of leprosy was clearly based on exclusion, it required that the lepers were 'placed outside' the city. In this model, the pure city keeps the stranger outside, the *grand enfermement*: close up and exclude (5). The model of the plague is completely different and gives rise to another paradigm. When the city is plagued it is impossible to move the plague victims outside. On the contrary, it is a case of creating a model of surveillance, control, and articulation of urban spaces. These are divided into sections, within each section each road is made autonomous and placed under the surveillance of an intendent; nobody can go out of the house but every day the houses are checked, each inhabitant controlled, how many are there, are they dead etc. It is a *quadrillage* of urban territory surveilled by intendents, doctors and soldiers. So whilst the leper was rejected by an apparatus of exclusion, the plague victim is encased, surveilled, controlled and cured through a complex web of dispositifs that divide and individualise, and in so doing also articulate the efficiency of control and of power.

Thus whereas leprosy is a paradigm of exclusive society, the plague is a paradigm of disciplinary techniques, technologies that will take society through the transition from the ancient regime to the disciplinary paradigm. According to Foucault, the political space of modernity is the result of these two paradigms: at some point the leper starts being treated like a plague victim, and viceversa. In other words, there emerges a projection onto the framework of exclusion and separation of leprosy, of the arrangement of surveillance, control, individualisation and the articulation of disciplinary power, so that it becomes a case of individualising, subjectivating and correcting the leper by treating him like a plague victim. So there is a double capture: on the one hand the simple binary opposition of diseased/healthy, mad/normal etc. and on the other hand there is a whole complicated series of differentiating dispositions of technologies and dispositifs that subjectify individuate and control subjects. This is a first useful framework for a general definition of metropolitan space today and it also explains the very interesting things you were talking about here: the impossibility of univocally defining borders, walls, spatialisation, because they are the result of the action of this different paradigm: no longer a simple binary division but the projection on this division of a complex series of articulating and individuating processes and technologies.

I remember Genoa 2001: I thought it was an experiment to treat the historical centre of an old city, still characterised by an ancient architectural structure, to see how in this centre one could suddenly create walls, gates that not only had the function of excluding and separating but were also there to articulate different spaces and individualise spaces and subjects. This analysis that Foucault summarily sketches out can be further developed and deepened. But now I want to end on a different note and concentrate on a different point.

I said that the city is a dispositif, or a group of dispositifs. The theory that you referred to earlier was the summary idea that one could divide reality into, on the one hand, humans and living beings, and, on the other, the dispositifs that continuously capture and take hold of them. However, the third fundamental element that defines a dispositif, for Foucault too I think, is the series of processes of subjectivation that result from the relation, the *corpo a corpo*, between individuals and dispositifs (6). There is no dispositif without a process of subjectivation, to talk of dispositif one has to see a process of subjectivation. Subject means two things: what leads an individual to assume and become attached to an individuality and

singularity, but also subjugation to an external power (7). There is no process of subjectivation without both these aspects.

What is often lacking, also in the movements, is the consciousness of this relation, the awareness that every time one takes on an identity one is also subjugated. Obviously this is also complicated by the fact that modern dispositifs not only entail the creation of a subjectivity but also and equally processes of de-subjectification. This might have always been the case, think about confession, which shaped Western subjectivity (the formal confession of sins), or juridical confession, which we still experience today. Confession always entailed in the creation of a subject also the negation of a subject, for instance in the figure of the sinner and confessor, it is clear that the assumption of a subjectivity goes together with a process of de-subjectivation. So the point today is that dispositifs are increasingly de-subjectifying so it is difficult to identify the processes of suvbjectivation that they create. But the metropolis is also a space where a huge process of creation of subjectivity is taking place. About this we don't know enough. When I say that we need to know these processes, I am not just referring to the sociological or economic and social analysis; I am referring to the ontological level or Spinozian level that puts under question the subjects' ability/power to act; i.e. what, in the processes whereby a subject somehow becomes acttached to a subjective identity, leads to a change, an increase or decrease of his/her power to act (8). We lack this knowledge and this perhaps makes the metropolitan conflicts we witness today rather opaque.

I think that a confrontation with metropolitan dispositifs will only be possible when we penetrate the processes of subjectivation that the metropolis entails in a more articulated way, deeper. Because I think that the outcome of conflicts depends on this: on the power to act and intervene on processes of subjectivation, in order to reach that stage that I would call a point of ungovernability. The ungovernable where power can shipwreck in its figure of government, the ungovernable that I think is always the beginning and the line of flight of all politics.

*Transcribed and translated by **Arianna Bove**

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Translator's notes: (1) allontanarsi is the verb used in the original; (2) tessuto: material, cloth, woven fabric; (3) citta franca is so called because it is exempt from feudal tax (franca = free, nice idiom: farla franca, 'getting away with it'); (4) ricade sul particolare: falls onto but also hangs and incumbs on; (5) These reflections can be found in Michel Foucault's Lectures on Les Anormaux, given at the College de France in 1975, specifically this issue is treated on 15th January, Lecture II. The 1975 lectures are published in English by Verso as *The Abnormals* (London: 2003), in French by Gallimard (Paris: 1999) and in Italian by Feltrinelli (Milan: 2000). Excellent stuff; (6) Funny how in English there is *head to head* and *face to face*, but no *body to body*. The Leviathan; (7) assoggettamento; (8) the usual conundrum: capacita' in Italian.