

The struggle for self-managed social space

Alfredo M. Bonanno

Alfredo M. Bonanno
The struggle for self-managed social space
1987

Original title: *Le lotte per gli spazi sociali autogestiti. Spazio e capitale.*
Published in *Anarchismo* N. 56, 1987. In English in *Deranged* Issue 0.
Translated by Jean Weir.

archive.elephanteditions.net



1987

The function that space has had throughout the development of capitalism could be described as a real 'history'.

From the first 'enclosures' of great masses of people into circumscribed spaces to the most advanced factories today, capitalism has tried to *cut out* portions of space to dedicate them to one specific use: the production of surplus value. Now, with the advent of the recent post-industrial development and advances in the technological process, the management of this space has changed profoundly. It has passed from partial management to a total one. In this capital has had the support of power and the State. We think that it is important to reflect on the conditions of the relationship that exists today between *social space and capital*.

No part of physical space is free from the interference of capital. From side-real space to the ocean depths, from the mountains to the rivers, from the seas to the deserts, from the great metropoli to the most out of the way villages. A series of relations between elements that seem far apart are linked by the common matrix of being objects of exploitation intersecting and covering each other. In this way we can have the illusion that we are going somewhere far away, out of this world, as they say, then discover that even there, in that place, the mechanisms of capital reach it and function perfectly. That explains why we are against ecologism just as we are against any other 'alternative' proposal that claims to do something against exploitation by cutting out one part of reality. Of course, we also start off from one part in our interventions, but we don't delude ourselves that we can really attack the enemy by staying within that 'part'. To move on to attack we must go beyond fragmentation (single issues), a strategy that has been imposed upon us by capital.

Now, of the misappropriation that comes about through exploitation, the most serious, because it has the worst consequences, is that of time and of space. In substance the two are linked. Capital steals our time, obliging us to work and conditioning our life, that becomes infested with clocks, obligations and deadlines, right down to the tiniest detail. By stealing our time they prevent us from understanding ourselves, they estrange us from ourselves. They alienate us. Without time we do not even notice the theft of space any more. We need time to even notice the existence of space. To think, to listen, to dream, to desire. By living space in terms of distance, kilometres to be crossed, and moving from one place to another, we lose sight of our relationship with things, nature and the world.

Capital has stolen our time from us (it needed it for production) and it has stolen our space (it needed it in the first place as places of production, then as a system of control and repression, then to get general consensus). Now we are faced with the need to move to expropriate our time and our space. This expropriation will never be anything but violent and traumatic. Both for us

The State and capital put precise limits on us which, once they have been overcome, immediately put us in the condition of being 'outlaws'. To squat means to overcome these limits, it means to become an 'outlaw'. That is why it is necessary to make a violent break with the rules that have been imposed on us. That is why it is necessary to squat.

Coming to the second phase, it is more than obvious that we must know how to take our freedom ourselves, through our struggles. It is not written in any constitution that someone will give it to us. Also social space, no one wants to give it to us. Whoever has it manages it according to their own interests (which are sometimes to not use them at all and simply leave them empty). In cases where these spaces are given to us, that depends on the fact that they want to control us, they want to ghettoize us. Instead of putting the classic cop on our tail, which costs money, so that they know where we are and what kind of things we are talking about. That is why, sometimes, they are quite happy to give us spaces, especially after we have begun our action of intervention in social reality. It is obvious that we don't need spaces of this kind, which cannot be called self-managed, because self-management is not just a question of managing the inside of the place.

We must therefore take our spaces ourselves, i.e. squat them. But it is not just a question of taking them, we must also defend them.

This defence must not only be a question of barricading behind a wall and putting out barbed wire in front. We cannot simply limit ourselves to keeping the cops out. To defend the conquered social space it is necessary to grow, qualitatively and quantitatively, with outside intervention and the capacity to develop a discourse that has some meaning and doesn't simply reduce itself to the satisfaction of one's own interests or the exercise of one's own personal capacities. Music, poetry etc., are all very interesting but, if they remain closed within the space, even squatted, it would just be one characteristic of the ghetto.

The best way to defend the conquered space is therefore the opening towards the outside.

To conclude we can say: the conquest of space only comes about with violent occupation, in that any other road (bargaining) cannot be covered. After the self-management of space comes about with the defence that doesn't only consist of the minimal aspects that we could call 'military', but also, and mainly, in opening oneself up to the outside, in talking to people, in aggregating and linking one's own situation to the situation of the area one happens to be in.

and for our enemies. Our attack cannot fail to cause damage and ruin. It is in the logic of things, the logic of the class war. The project of power is global. It cannot allow 'empty spaces' to exist. For the opposite reason, our project of liberation is also global. If we allow capital to globalize power we will definitely be dead.

Fortunately the road that power must still cover is still a long one. We are only at the beginning of a design based on the division of reality into two parts, that are also physically separate. After the global misappropriation of space (and time), capital is separating it into two parts. It is no longer a question of the old fragmentation, but of a net division, a real WALL between the **included** and the **excluded**. The first will be guaranteed a situation of privilege, power, high level culture, projectuality and creativity; the second, a situation of survival, consensus, sub-culture, supine acceptance, lack of stimuli and perhaps even needs. In this perspective capital and the State need the availability of the whole social space. Nothing must escape their control.

Not only. Capital now disposes of technologies that allow it not simply the simple physical possession of space, but also its production. Think of the capacity of operating in 'real time' communication between two points thousands of kilometres away from each other. That does not only change production (quality, variety, creativity, storage, etc), but also and principally the human asset of social relations (which are also economic).

So, capital **produces** space on the basis of its project of exploitation and power. It transforms and destroys nature, modifies the cities and the countryside, destroys the seas, rivers, lakes, conditions stellar distances to its militaristic logic. Then, the spaces thus produced serve to channel individuals. That is how we end up in long lines of cars on the motorways, in queues in the supermarkets. That way we find ourselves afflicted with chaotic trajectories, appointments we can't miss, fictitious interests that make us suffer and oblige us to make continual senseless displacements. We move within the spaces that have been programmed for us that we only have the illusion of having 'chosen'. Our houses are full of useless, harmful objects. Space has become so restricted or, better, it has changed according to the needs of capitalist production, which must sell televisions, fridges, washing machines, bedroom furniture and kitchens.

So, almost without realizing it, our time is disappearing into nothing and our space is reducing itself to relating to objects that testify to capital's persuasive powers. In this way we are educated to repetitiveness. We make the same gestures, touch the same objects, push the same buttons. Repetitiveness is, as everybody knows (but systematically forgets) the antichamber of consensus.

For its part, capital must take away our space. It is practically obliged. And that is because it cannot leave room to our creativity, our capacity of **do-it-yourself**, our desire for the new (which is then the stimulus first to find solu-

tions that reveal undreamed of gifts of spontaneity and wealth). If capital were to leave space to these forces of the individual it would not be able to maintain the pace of repetition that is indispensable to production, which, we must not forget, is only such on condition that it can also be re-production. Think of the efforts (aided by electronic techniques) that capital is making to realize everybody's desires with the maximum diversification possible (but all centralized and codified). The great labels of fashion items, the fast-food chains, the advertising that exalts the taste of the individual within mass production, are no more than attempts to prevent other roads that could still be tried today.

Space that is therefore produced and reproduced on the basis of consensus but also possesses considerable purely repressive aspects in the policing sense of the term. Control regulates various fluxes in the narrowest possible way. Raw materials and men, ideas and machines, money and desires. Everything is coordinated because everything has been, preventively, homogenized; differences have become precisely simply that, they are no longer radical diversity. They have been reduced to the level of appearance and, in this new guise, exalted to the maximum, as the kingdom of freedom.

The strategy of power is therefore that of controlling 'all' space in the same way as it controls 'all' time. It is not just a question of police control but mainly control based on consensus and the acceptance of models of behaviour and scales of values that belong to the technocrats of capital.

What to do: Go in search of lost time? Of lost space?

Certainly not in the sense of a nostalgic trajectory in a backwards direction. In life nothing can turn back just as nothing ever presents itself the same way a second time around (nor in one that is absolutely different).

The old relationship with space left a **trace**. A sign of a physical place. The sign of people and their things. A road, a piazza, a country lane, a river, the sea and the sky, the woods and the mountains, had an open discourse with the individual who knew how to (and wanted to) listen to them. And affinity with other individuals took people to the same places, animated feelings, pushed to them to action and reflection. There were individuals whereas now one hides like a part of a whole, of a crowd. Once we were exposed, often unprepared and vulnerable. Now we go under the cover of uniformity and repetitiveness. We feel more secure because we belong to the flock. There are no points of reference in space, in time. Everything is about to be wiped out. Sounds, smells, thoughts and dreams. Everything is being produced and reproduced. Everything is about to be reduced to merchandise.

In this perspective the struggle for social spaces becomes a struggle for the reappropriation of the whole 'territory' beyond and against the rules of control and consensus.

Occupation and defence of self-managed spaces

By self-managed social space we mean an urban space conquered by part of a mass organization composed of individuals with the aim of using it directly, for their own aims (self-managing) a physical space, with criteria that are beyond the logic of capitalist power and exploitation.

Compared to social spaces (school, barracks, factories, etc) where a functioning is imposed directed at guaranteeing the interests of capital, the struggle for the conquest of a self-managed social space constitutes an important and continuous attempt to practice freedom of action and expression that would be denied elsewhere.

This struggle is therefore, right from the start, constituted of a whole of antiauthoritarian actions that all start from a critical analysis of the class society and its main functions. They are therefore struggles that adopt the method of self-management, they try to realize freedom and social and individual equality, so are indispensable for proceeding along the road of the abolition of power and capitalist exploitation.

The self-managed method is the only one that allows the instrumentalisation of the struggle by political parties, unions, council representatives, etc. But for that to happen, it is necessary that the method be employed correctly, guaranteeing freedom of decision on all the operative facts that are to be realized during the course of the struggle.

This self-managing phase can be schematically distinguished in two phases: a) self-management of the struggle for the conquest of social space through squatting; b) self-management of the struggle for the defence of the social space through an opening towards the outside.

As far as the first phase is concerned it should be said that the occupation can only be realized if it has managed to constitute a structure that we can define as mass, based on a precise affinity between the individuals that belong to it. It is not so much an affinity of an ideological character, but substantial. The existence of common desires, common problems, make possible, in a given moment, a group of people to get together to struggle against the common exploitation. It is a question of a point upon which it is necessary to be very clear. The class dominion of capital is the cause of the present lack of self-managed social space and the contemporaneous presence of fictitious social spaces, precisely because within the latter economic and social exploitation is realized that serves the interests of power of capital. The struggle for the 'real' conquest of social spaces therefore necessarily passes through the violent rupture with the dominant logic of capital. The latter cannot maintain and will not maintain a passive attitude before our concrete initiatives of real liberation of social spaces, because these initiatives will constitute a considerable danger for him.