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Making the temporary become chronic: the transit city

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Abstract. When the French authorities resolved to dismantle the Parisian bidoville, the new dispositif they resorted to was that of transit cities, a programmatically provisional solution that still today, however, awaits to be completely overcome. In Nanterre, for example, the definitive reconversion of the cité des Potagers into a district of rent-controlled housing will only be completed in 2025, but in the meantime the entire history of these complexes will have resulted in the chronicisation of an "unfinished urbanity", as Abdelmalek Sayad defined it, determined on the border between the dimension of the temporary and the more implicit one of the class, gender and race hierarchies that the reference to the temporary allows to eternalise.

Keywords: Temporary; Transit; Détournement.

1. Method premise: Against ventriloquism

The perspective in which I would like to try to make my contribution is that for which citizenship understood as a material condition of living in the city, can be considered an act of citizenship in the same way as conflicts, strikes, marches or any other kind of pressure that is more clearly mobilised at the confines of the formal statute of citizenship. By this I do not mean at all to deny the importance of struggles and their organisation, which remain essential and peculiar, but rather to support the thesis that their importance and this peculiarity derive from the fact that the various subjects involved in the forms of claiming citizenship are constituted first of all in the material (and sometimes illegal) struggle for existence. To exist and survive, for a historically not insignificant part of citizenship, has meant and still means exercising a right not yet recognised by the legal systems and therefore performing an act of performative citizenship.

In conclusion, we will mention how this extension from the struggle for rights to survival practices, in order to be theoretically plausible, involves a rereading of the text to which the reflection on performative citizenship is usually traced,[1] which is that of the William James Lectures held by John Austin at Harvard University in 1955, which later became famous under the title *How to do things with words*.

A final premise to the analysis of the case that will allow me to set up this reasoning concerns a second misunderstanding in which I would be sorry to run into, that for which to qualify forms of life from the perspective of citizenship would be something politically implicit and unaware, that a certain sociology has identified with the *infrapolitical* of the gestures and actions carried out by those who would not be fully able to understand the reasons and the scope. Because what substantiates this significance, Donna Haraway would say, is always a *ventriloquy*, an attribution of meaning with which reality remains at the disposal of its interpreters, even the most benevolent.[2]

In one of the evolutions of the case to which I will have to refer, that of the transformation of the Parisian *bidonville* into the transit city (*cité de transit*), the persistence of this epistemological pose appeared in all evidence in the autumn of 2005, when there were not a few or the worst to identify the protagonists of the riots in the banlieue with the "rebels

without a cause” of the homonymous film by Nicholas Ray. As for the character played by James Dean, it was therefore necessary to postulate a cause that referred to the relationship with the parental culture, to a story of fathers and sons that once recognised could have made the real difference between the wrongs and the reasons. It still happens today that we come across the speculative horizon of these mythologies and their attempt to redeem violence and youthful vandalism, for example, by placing them in terms of an “informal register of dissent”. [3] What seems to me to emerge, however, is how to operate on the border between survival and formal citizenship, if only in reference to the case I dealt with, is an absolutely formal (in the sense of formally determined and transmissible) register of experimentation: not always profitable, sometimes dramatic, but still an alternative to the postulate of alleged deficiencies that would imply the need for ventriloquism.

2. Coal in the bathtub

The case in point, as I mentioned, is the dismantling of the Parisian *bidonville* (but not only) and of the instrument through which it was decided to implement it: the *cit  de transit*. A device that knows its period of greatest diffusion at the beginning of the seventies, but which inherits some fundamental characteristics from the other instruments with which the French administration has already faced the emergency of Algerian, Moroccan, Portuguese, Spanish and internal immigration, especially of labourers, in the previous decade. [4] *Ethnic foyers*, *emergency city*, *promotional city*: these are the names that now correspond above all to the new urgency to govern a migratory flow from Algeria that the War of Independence (1954-1962) made at the same time more voluminous, composite and turbulent. Voluminous and composite, because now it is not only the workers who immigrate, but also their families, since the war would have forced them to flee anyway and therefore proves to be a valid reason for derogating from the tradition that required men not to involve women and children in their migration project. Turbulent, because now the members of the National Liberation Front can camouflage among the migrants, infest the shanty town and make proselytes. The emergency city and the promotional city therefore already respond to a programme of a panoptic order that only since 1967 has been specified in the corrective and officially preparatory vocation of the transit city.

At this point, the transit will no longer be understood as a temporary presence of the immigrant inside the hexagon, but as the passage of a defective population to a different way of living and inhabiting the city, finally conforming to customs more civilised than the former colonisers. From now on, the transit cities will have the task of taking charge of the entire lifestyle of the families who will be relocated there, since if the shanty town represented “leprosy”, “cancer” or “gangrene” which risked infecting the urban organism, its inhabitants – in the absence of a transitory accompaniment to civilisation – can infect the social body and therefore require adequate care. The frequent medical and surgical metaphor, then, is flanked by the grey literature of decrees and ordinances with the usual resources of the *psy* discourse, according to which to distinguish these families would be, for example, “poverty in phantasmatic elaboration”, a character that would prevent them from imagining a future other than the past misery in which they lived. [5]

Thus, in the new agglomerations, all the families whose “access to permanent accommodation is not feasible without educational action” will have to end up for a limited

period, intended to correct not only the atavisms attributable to their geographical origin, but also the bad habits that in the meantime they will certainly have acquired in the defective habitat of the slum. We must act, provide individuals who come from the slum with a “comfortable and reassuring” solution in order to “tame them, encourage them, familiarise them with the first needs of modern life and coexistence”. Centralised lifts, hot water and waste bins will come later, when Algerians will have assimilated the first advantages of metropolitan comfort.

Especially since when the elevators are there they fill up with graffiti or urine, because “it is known that these people break everything”.[6] This is reported by a pioneer of urban anthropology, Colette Pétonnet, in an attempt to synthesise the point of view that institutions aspired to naturalise through the elaboration of their preparatory mission. A mission that at this point can be fully understood, perhaps, by relying on Colette Guillaumin's reflections on the notion of *mark*, with which it enters into considerable resonance.

According to Guillaumin, we are dealing with marks when a consequence of social relations tends to stand out as their origin. Within this inversion, the very idea that there may be individuals naturally inclined to break everything, for example, serves to make permanent the validity of certain class, race and gender hierarchies through the perpetuation of their effects. These hierarchies are therefore considered a product of the internal traits of those who suffer from their reiteration, the result of an “endogenous determinism” that the analysis of the mark system has the task of deconstructing.[7] And it would seem that Guillaumin identified the device that governs the transit city, which according to the Vivien law of 10 July 1970 will be built to be disassembled within 10 years (i.e. with inexpensive materials and no services) and that every two years should have foreseen the rotation of the inhabitants.

Indeed, twenty years later, when both the residents and the buildings are still there,[8] the preparatory habitat will finally be revealed for what it is: *an emergency device that serves to rationalise exclusion through the chronicisation of the temporary*. And in the meantime it will be the alleged “endogenous determinism” of the inhabitants to have expressed itself in the forms of making-bidonville (*bidonvilisation*), that is to say in the presence of mud everywhere and in the soiled walls, in the frequent fires, in the breaking of drains. Because these people break everything, they said, because they are not used to comfort and collective housing, because they do not know how to use them: it will still be the old example of “coal in the bathtub”, as for the former slaves of which Francis Scott Fitzgerald tells in *Diamond as big as the Ritz*, to prove how much it is preferable for families housed in the *cit  * not to move elsewhere, to apartments and neighbourhoods that, precisely because they are better served and more in step with modernity, would conflict with their natural propensity to use the bathtub to store coal.[5]

3. An almost surrealist d  tournement

But the making-bidonville does not limit itself to naming the course of the alleged pathologies that the mark system attributes to the endogenous determinism of individuals unnecessarily subjected to the corrective enterprise of transit. Mentioning it in a potentially different perspective is Abdelmalek Sayad in his ethnographic work on the Nanterre slum, where entrepreneurs have found ways to stabilise immigrant labour, “sleep merchants” have had more sleep to sell, and the police have been able to control the homeless population more

easily. If the slum is presented as “a continuous creation”, says Sayad, it is above all because it constitutes the always dynamic balance point between a multiplicity of different interests. Nevertheless, he adds, it is only to the skin of those who live in it that mud sticks, the “mark of an infra-urbanity” that cannot entirely refer to either the city or the countryside, “because in the slum neither can assert itself as such”, thus determining a condition of “unfinished urbanity” that outrages the metropolis, its aesthetics and its values.[9] And the mud becomes the main reason for recognition and ridicule when the inhabitants of the Nanterre shantytown go to the city fountain to stock up on water, but alongside a second character highlighted by Sayad which in the development of our reasoning could turn out to be decisive. I quote in full, because it seems to me the crucial passage of the investigation: “There is something moving in hearing today the former inhabitants of the slum speak with the greatest seriousness in the world of the tools they have equipped themselves to obtain water [...]. Recourse is made to salvaged objects, subjected to a metamorphosis, to an almost surrealist *détournement* with respect to their original function. Thus, shopping carts are used, a lot of rickshaws, strollers, wheelchairs, trabiccoli, and sometimes tools, machine platforms for transport or maintenance, everything that is on wheels and can function as a support for loads can become in the hands of the inhabitants a tool whose usefulness and effectiveness is praised and at the same time the toy that has the secret of transforming the most annoying and unpleasant task, the corvee of water, into a kind of game”.

Sayad refers to an almost surrealist *détournement* probably because it is not the Situationist International but the Surrealist Movement that has established the most significant relationships with the contexts of decolonisation (think, for example, of the Césaire and the *Tropiques* magazine, of which Breton becomes a sort of spokesperson in Europe). But it is also true that perhaps the sense of what Sayad is showing can be traced back to the whole story of the historical avant-gardes and subcultures, from the dadaist *ready-made* to *do it yourself* punks. The car itself, for example, not the objects subjected to metamorphosis but the actual car, “has the *détournée* function of an instrument for the supply of water, because in the long run it costs less than the daily service that is paid to the children of the slum”. And it is only by not grasping this *détournement*, therefore, by ignoring that the most equipped stalls in the internal market of the slum are those of salvaged objects and that the slum, in short, inherits from the colonial experience and decolonisation that immense “work on objects and on forms” with which Achille Mbembe wanted to represent the world described by Frantz Fanon in the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*[10], that the car can be reduced to the mark of the scandalous tendency of these people to spend their money very badly, without giving priority to the expenses that would allow them to finally leave hell.

Incidentally, this is what still happens in the postcolonial dimension of the migrants’ relationship with the smartphone, which once associated with the absence of a real condition of necessity, becoming the mark of a probable scam against transit or landing countries. And this while the web can only remain the diasporic medium *par excellence*, because only in cyberspace is it possible to shorten the distances that separate those who depart from those who remain and those who depart from one other, transforming devices such as satellite dishes or mobile phones into a “fragment of a house”. The same fragment that allows the migrant to connect to the so-called *mobile commons*, that is to say the invisible and always

up-to-date networks of information through which he can maintain contacts, plan travel and procure the jobs on which the success or failure of the journey depend [11].

In this light, beyond the most sensational and disturbing effects that pertain to the production and perception of decay, the making-bidonville itself can be interpreted as a practice of *détournement* through which the subject contributes to the formal determination of reality, without limiting himself to passively undergo its automatisms or the tendency to reproduce. If indeed the shanty town does not completely disappear but is “metamorphosed” into the new transit cities, as Sayad claims, it is not only in the form of a *dispositif* designed to make the subordination of the postcolonial condition chronic, but also as a resource for the survival of this same *dispositif*. Also *bidonvillisation* corresponds to a strategy of levelling out, in short, of transforming the space into a less hostile place and better corresponding to one's needs.

4. Perlocutionary sequel

In conclusion, what Alfred Sohn-Rethel wrote about the city of Naples comes to mind: “No longer applied to the prescribed ends, the technique here undergoes the most unexpected deviations. As another example, the revolving motor released from the constraints of a destroyed motorcycle and delegated, by means of eccentric axles, to whip cream in a dairy could be useful. In this unexpected way, modern technology provides, despite itself, to this seventeenth century which unexpectedly continues, despite being equipped with electric trams and telephones, formidable aids and tools at the service of the freedoms of this life”.[12] In the specific case of the transit city, therefore, even *bidonvillisation* can perhaps be interpreted as an instrument “at the service of the freedoms of this life” or as a survival strategy for some of these freedoms on the borders of a formal citizenship that does not yet recognise them. But in order to grasp the dynamics of this relationship between concreteness and disavowal, and to imagine its developments, it does not seem necessary to me to resort to the ventriloquism of intentions or environmental causes, that is to say that it is possible to renounce the coordinates that John Austin uses to classify a speech act. Yet we continue to speak of performative citizenship in the sense of materially practiced and pregnant with consequences, even when the aim is not to retroactively act on the formal status of citizenship and is therefore not conceived as a political action.

Each statement, John Austin himself said, ends up exposing itself to the “production of a perlocutory sequel” which makes it temporarily operational even beyond the constitutive contexts, objectives and conventions.[13] For us, then, establishing that in the perlocutionary sequel of an action, political and legal transformations can also be determined without resorting to the self-referential expedient of ventriloquism, means recognising the right importance to the agency of a subject who has to do it despite everything.

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