

# Culture in the City.

## Infrastructures and Real Utopias, in Three Steps

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### Infrastructures of connectivity

We live in a space deeply encoded by a sort of global infrastructure. We continually experience its effects on the ordinary scale of our daily lives, and indeed it is precisely that daily dimension in which the global infrastructure imposes itself in the format of the natural objectivity of things and the inexorable way with which they are in relation to each other. These infrastructures are inextricably tangible – railway or motorway networks, oil and gas pipelines, Internet backbones, extractive plants, containers and goods warehouses – and intangible – the Internet of Things, consumer profiling data, logistics models, standards that establish measures, formats, intensities. A multiplicity of infrastructures constantly at work, increasingly synchronised with each other and particularly pervasive in our forms of life. Socio-technical systems in which forms of extra-state power, much more agile and faster than the public actor, penetrate and significantly affect its ability to regulate. From the containers in which goods reach any place in the world to the software and online platforms through which, for example, we order those goods; from credit cards with a systematic thickness of 0.76 mm to be used in any ATM in the world to the security standards of buildings and homes: every aspect of our lives bears the signs of the presence of infrastructure effectively functional to the production and control of connectivity.

In fact, connectivity and the social imaginary through which it takes shape are a historically determined and therefore changeable product. The peculiarity of our time consists precisely in the synchronisation between the imaginary of connectivity and the factory-world, that is, the international division of labour and the global value chains that this global infrastructure allows. In this sense, the pandemic, or rather, as

pointed out a few weeks ago in an editorial by the authoritative Lancet, the “syndemic” (a situation in which viral dynamics combine with non-communicable diseases and their social determinants, reproducing and further exacerbating inequalities), is dramatic counter evidence of this historical peculiarity: it is proving devastating (also) to the extent that it affects the very socio-material heart of life forms in the times of infrastructure capitalism, or in other words connectivity.

## **Infrastructures and/of experience in the city**

Things, but, we have said, at the same time relationships between things, infrastructures are not identifiable merely with the technical and organisational properties that characterise them and with the services and objects that they are able to deliver and distribute. Indeed, they play a decisive role in the way individuals experience reality. A version of experience where the dominant cultural programme, oriented towards the unlimited expansion of humanity’s reach and the configuration of the world as entirely available has achieved a particularly advanced degree of development, also thanks to infrastructures and their synchronisation.

The city plays a central and at the same time ambivalent role in the space of global infrastructure. Its centrality is expressed in relation to the social imaginary of connectivity. Infrastructure of infrastructures, the city is a space where the social imaginary of connectivity manifests itself, both in the physical and in the immaterial dimension, in daily experience. Both a prerequisite and a product of the continuous mobilisation of infrastructure, this imaginary finds its own space of choice in the city. In the city, the social imaginary of connectivity is practised, interrogated, investigated, narrated, manipulated and modified. In fact, cities are the places where it seems most possible to take part in that imaginary and actively contribute to its production, reproduction and transformation. In other words, the city is the primary space where this imaginary is explicitly made the object of cultural elaboration.

However, precisely in the process of elaborating culture and its spatialisation in the city, the ambivalence that characterises the relationship between the global infrastructure and the city itself emerges, as we have said. In this context, in fact, the relationship between the imaginary of connectivity and the city can be interpreted based on a polarisation that, as always, is configured in reality in a much more spurious and intricate way. On the one hand, that relationship takes the form of an operation belonging to what Boltanski and Esquerre have called the “economy of enrichment”. As in the technical process with which a metal is “enriched”, the latter makes use of the spatialised culture in the city to increase (enrich, in fact) the value of things and existing practices.

An economy based on the exploitation of the past (real or invented, in turn the object of elaboration in the contemporary social imaginary: the centrality of storytelling), the evidence of which can only be found by combining distinct sectors and areas of activity and usually not linked in the analysis: from the arts to trade in ancient objects, from museums to the luxury industry, from artistic craftsmanship to promoting local heritage and tourism. In this sense, the relationship between the imaginary of connectivity and the urban dimension is configured as a value extraction operation substantially similar to – albeit empirically different from – that which at other latitudes presents itself as extraction of raw materials, in the literal sense.

On the other hand, in the relationship between imaginary and global infrastructure there is a different way in which the process of elaborating culture and its urban spatialisation take shape. Consistent with the historical vocation of the city (“city air makes free”), the conditions for the development of this second logic of relationship between culture and space can be found within the same dynamics just described, though buried in potential or non-systematic forms. These are the possibilities for the exercise of culture understood as a specific capability, what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls “capacity to aspire”, that is, the ability to imagine the future, the spaces we live in, social relationships, our activities, the structure of the daily life in which we put our lives in forms other than those that dominate the imaginary of connectivity.

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### **Real utopias: practical inquiry and capacity to aspire**

The work of practical inquiry conducted by the Rock project took place precisely on the terrain of this second polarity of the configuration of the relationship between space and culture. It sought to take the perspective of concrete utopias, investigating “the potential dimension of the existing”, writes Giovanni Leoni, “relying on ordinary, quotidian strategies”. Consistent with the design of the Rock project, much programmatic and practical energy was spent in the construction of participatory processes focused on the transformation of specific places in the city. In this regard, it should be stressed that the results must be commensurate with the complexity of the field of intervention. In fact, the “capacity to aspire” is a social product and not a natural data point, and furthermore it is not equitably distributed socially. Unlike a few decades ago, in international programmes there has been a growing emphasis – often more formal than substantive – on participation as a key and essential element of any urban transformation project. However, the application of this emphasis has often been trapped in a misunderstanding. The latter consists in the adoption of participatory logics based on the idea that the main difficulty

is providing the concrete opportunity to participate, and that citizens, with all their social, cultural, economic differences etc., will naturally take advantage of this opportunity offered to them. In fact, the public's interest in exercising its critical and judgemental responsibilities – this is what effective participation consists of – cannot be assumed as a starting point, a natural endowment of citizens. Rather, it is itself to be considered as a possible result in a practical inquiry.

In this sense, the logic of concrete utopias assumed in the context of the Rock project moves – with all the effort that this entails and the strategic and tactical uncertainties inevitably linked to institutionally complex contexts – in a direction opposite to the extractive polarity of the relationship between culture and space that we mentioned above. The latter also relies on the involvement of social actors, but configuring it (in terms of what can be defined as an activity of extraction of connectivity) in a manner that is purely functional to operations of territorial branding and the promotion of the heritage of urban spaces. In this framework the city itself becomes a physical and experiential platform that, like the virtual ones which the gig economy rests on, behind a smart window of openness and participation, in fact conceals a relational dynamic where the rules are given and where citizens are involved in problem solving (to provide data and information; to consume pre-packaged goods or services) but never in problem setting, i.e. the public sphere where problems are defined and interpreted.

In contrast, the logic of concrete utopias operates in the awareness that it is necessary to act based on the idea that culture and participation strengthen each other. The “capacity to aspire” is built by creating the conditions through which it can be exercised, consolidated and expanded, starting from concrete places and situations. This implies, among other things, a different approach to technologies and the use of the enormous amount of data that they can produce, oriented towards a “site-specific use of technology and data”, again recalling the words of Giovanni Leoni, “according to which technologies are subjected to cities and communities and not vice versa”. It becomes critical to focus attention on what Amartya Sen identified as the “informational bases” of decision-making processes: What kind of knowledge contributes to defining what needs to be considered? Is it only coded knowledge, only technical knowledge that is mobilised or is the knowledge related to the experience of the problems being acted on also considered? What languages are enabled? Which persons are called upon and can speak about what the meaning and object of an action will be and what may instead fall into the shadow of legitimate indifference? It is clear that the perspective of concrete utopias is part of that conception of development – i.e. the paradigm of urban and territorial development – that the “self-subversive” development economist Albert Hirschman called “possibilism”.

From this perspective, when approaching social reality it is worth pursuing specificity, uniqueness and the unexpected rather than delving exclusively into logics focused on approximation of the probable. In fact, it is a matter of expanding what is perceived as possible, thus favouring processes of knowledge in which the transformative value is emphasised more than that of control.

On the same terrain on which a powerful social imaginary is at work reproducing both processes of extraction of connectivity and individual motivations to take part in them cooperatively, it is evident that there are no shortcuts to experimenting with different strategies of combining culture and space. It is about contributing to the elaboration of different social imaginary, where the many potentials are wasted or marginalised in a imaginary subjected to strict extractive logics. These same international research funding programmes incorporate the ambivalence we mentioned, and it could not be otherwise. However, where there is ambivalence it means precisely that there is no determinism – neither scientific, nor social, nor technological – and there remains room for manoeuvring to bring out the critical abilities that are structural components of social life and not the exclusive property of scientific knowledge. By tracking these abilities, channelling their potential into practical inquiries, it is possible to put them to work in the construction of concrete utopias. It is worth insisting on.