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The Innovation Complex: The Haunted Mansion Perspective

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Abstract

This intervention to the debate is revolved around the issue of temporalities and the question of a real discontinuity between the Innovation Complex and previous forms of organized capitalism. Drawing on the metaphor of an haunted mansion, we argue that the conflict between capital and labour on the one hand, and the emergence of huge environmental externalities on the other hand, are reconfiguring the social and spatial arrangements through which the Innovation Complex is diffusing.

Keywords: Smart city; environment; new urban economy.

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When the anarchist squat named "Asilo Occupato" (Squatted Kindergarten) was evicted in February 2019, part of the city in which I live, Turin, felt relieved. One of the few remnants of a turbulent past, the home for the most radical side of social movements in town, was back "in the availability of the city and of all the Turinese people", as the mayor Chiara Appendino said a few days after the eviction operation. What many politicians and local media called a "restitution to citizens" generated a brief debate on the possible future uses of a property located within a semi-central but very poor neighborhood of the city. There was some debate on social, community-oriented and temporary usage, until, a few months later, a much more powerful and cool hypothesis emerged. In the words of Paola Pisano, the municipal adjunct for innovation and smart city of the city of Turin, an economist who will become Minister for Technological Innovation and Digitization of the Italian Republic within a few months, the freed space would become "an incubator for start-ups and innovative companies in the automotive and aerospace sectors, sectors that characterize Turin's identity, but also in telecommunications and robotics". In short, the former squat should have become what the local newspapers immediately renamed "the house of robots".

The city of Turin has long courted the *innovation complex* that Sharon Zukin (2020a) eviscerates in her book that we are discussing here. This happened ever since the first growth machines and the first underlying political agreements emerged in the early 1990s to imagine futures that were no longer industrial or, in any case, diversely industrial. This phase of development towards the Smart City was very well analyzed by the Turin geographer Alberto Vanolo, who depicted the path taken by this city in two articles published in 2008, the first, and eight years later, in 2015, the second. Similarly to what Zukin (2020a) says about innovation as "a political category" (p. 200), Vanolo too thought of the Smart City as a political project of urban branding (Vanolo, 2015).

One of the most interesting conclusions that Vanolo reached concerns the bifurcation of this branding: on the one hand facing outwards, for tourists and investors, and on the other side facing inwards, that is towards those citizens who, as Zukin (2020a) rightly remembers, are "stakeholders too" (p. 227). While externally the city of Turin promotes itself as the capital of ice cream, chocolate, and food in general,

> [i]n fact, internal branding veers, to some extent, in another direction, that is the smart city discourse, which is connected to the celebration of the salvific role of new technologies. Apps, sensors, big data and smartphones will apparently ensure sustainability, inclusion, quality of life, justice, wealth, European funds, and other positive effects, all of which are highly needed in current times of crisis (Vanolo, 2015, p. 6).

The proposal to transform a newly evicted squat into a "house of robots" falls precisely within this disciplinary *smartmentality* (Vanolo, 2014), because the citizen-as-stakeholder must imagine his own territory within a narrative of future success, and this seems be guaranteed by technology and innovation primarily or solely.

If we look comparatively at the development (or desire for development) of the cities of the Global North, none of them escapes "the smartmentality of the innovation complex": a blind trust, closer to faith than to reason, in the revolutionary role of technologies in generating widespread well-being. In a certain sense, part of the narrative of the glorious industrial past is taken up, precisely the myth of the *Trente Glorieuses*. According to a generous recollection of the industrial trajectory this was based on widespread growth, improvement of living condi-

tions and some sort of collective social elevator, while now, if the innovation complex were to be successfully implanted on the urban body, then it could generate the same results.

As anyone who has studied not only a comparative sociology of urban development, but also a comparative history of industrial and urban transformations, knows, the many lights of the roaring post-war years (and actually even earlier) were often obscured by several processes triggered by exactly that same model of development.

It could be recalled, for example, that economic growth was certainly supported by an incredible demographic transition that was based not so much on endogenous growth as on massive urbanization, which was the result of various waves of international and internal migration. The epic of urban growth thanks to the arrival of hundreds of millions of peasants who all over the planet abandoned the rural worlds to become urbanites in a very short time, certainly also had a heroic and liberating cultural, social, political and economic dimension, but it implied at the same time an enormous quantity of new differentiated inequalities, conflicts and even highly painful events. The development of slums, the spread of epidemics, racist reactions as well as the birth of social phenomena that were "discovered" and celebrated by the first and the second urban sociology schools of Chicago, such as the birth of gangs and all those new urban youth aggregates that later were called subcultures, are all effects of the success of that economic model.

We are therefore tempted to quote an earlier Zukin (1996), when she asked herself a few decades ago about urban cultures: "whose complex? and whose city?".

It is probably even more interesting, under the heading "dark side of the development", to indicate the environmental variable, if it is true that the great epic of industrial development whose positive effects are now glorified is also the turning point in the destruction of the planet as we know it. The geographies of natural resources extraction were the hidden side, in different places but within the same process, of precisely the same growth dynamic that was already denounced in 1972 by the famous report on *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). If we collectively started admitting the very idea that we were entering, in the worst way, in the Anthropocene only once industrial capitalism was proven dead, or in any case dead in the territories where it was generated, the fact remains that at the time, only a few visionaries or critics, like Lewis Mumford for instance, denounced its catastrophic effects with firmness and rigor.

The innovation complex that Zukin talks about starts therefore, and precisely because, it is a "political category" from a selective and condescending reading of the past leading to a vision of new systemic margins to be exploited (Sassen, 2014).

To my opinion we shall start from one of Zukin's privileged witnesses saying: "is there really a 'new' economy?". Are we moving within one of the infinite new versions of variegated capitalism, dominated certainly by platforms and digital economies (and this platform capitalism is certainly also new) or is it some new wine in old bottles, namely very traditional forms of capitalism and contradictions?

Here's my bottles, some of which, as they weren't opened 50 or 60 years ago, tend to reappear as ghosts from the past, recurring.

1 The Haunted Mansion of the New Urban Economy

The first ghost of the past, which Zukin describes very well, regards Amazon's project (but also Cuomo's and Di Blasio's administrations) to have their HQ2 built in Queens, and is a ghost concerning the tension between capital and work. We are at the heart of the best-known and

most studied tension of capitalism, and in general, of economic models as famously described by Polanyi in his *Great Transformation* (1944), and which concerns the struggle between the benefits that workers derive from selling their labor and wits to capital in order, for the latter, to prosper and often grow exponentially (at least in the early days of some technological innovation, until the diffusion curve, the dynamics of competition and the development, finally, of new and more profitable technologies do not make the former and its owners obsolete). Zukin convincingly tells the tale of a victory, or at least a set-back of the old world of workers, unions and even local polity, who understood that capital would have won the game of the opening of an HQ, without actually offer enough new jobs, and hence prosperity. We are in the middle of the twentieth century here, with the company promising thousands of jobs, only to admit, during the process, that the jobs were far fewer, and extremely polarized between few frontier jobs and a tide, however inadequate, of shitty jobs in the economy of services. In short, the ghost of exploitation, of the false promises of capitalism and of substantial mockery (seasoned with the inevitable trickle-down ideology) continues to roam the new urban economy mansion. Where trade union protections (New York as a union city), forms of solidarity and grassroots politics resist, where even within the business world there are many conflicting visions, things do not necessarily have to go as imagined by Jeff Bezos. A victory of Socialism? A failure of Capitalism?

Let's go back for a moment to the less fancy and decidedly grittier Turin. It's a city where youth unemployment has remained above 30% from the 1980s until now, largely affecting those children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the great internal migration that had made Turin a metropolis between the 1950s and the 1970s. In an urban world characterized by the same workers and trade union struggles that had forged "union city New York", de-industrialization continues inexorably and the local innovation complex, although having exactly the same characteristics as the New York one (a strikingly lesser magnitude, though), finds no opposition at all because the ghosts of unemployment, of the crisis and of the past has never left the local mansion. In short, in loser cities (Rousseau, 2009) where the ups-and-downs of the dot.com bubble have not really been enjoyed, where gentrification, when it has occurred, has only touched a few areas because there was not enough market demand for that type of speculation (here the original definition of Ruth Glass was still adequate, 50 years after its formulation, while elsewhere on the planet our colleagues had to invent super-gentrifications, new-built gentrifications, waves and alike) and where the rust of de-industrialization still chews infrastructures and biographies, the innovation complex looks like Eldorado and as such is branded in town.

My point here, therefore, however banal and, ultimately, always boringly the same for those who carry out case-study analyses more than comparative ones, is: to what extent the innovation complex is really the same syndrome across different regions and places? Or is it rather the way in which any single local system adapts to the few development opportunities offered by capitalism in its latest version?

2 The Second Ghost that Haunts Our Urban Mansions Is the Environment

I remember being in NYC in 2014, just two years after hurricane Sandy flooded huge parts of Lower Manhattan and caused major damages for several weeks in the whole region. I was carrying some fieldwork for a project on urban design firms (Semi & Bolzoni, 2020) and the whole local debate was captured by the concept of resilience. Adapting buildings here, making communities resilient there, accepting that urban living conditions would be increasingly com-

plicated, but also accepting the challenge of climate change in an entrepreneurial way: money could have been extracted from the rising oceans, in short! Roughly around the same time that we were all becoming more resilient, Sharon Zukin was starting her study on the spread of the innovation complex from Silicon Valley to New York, and the socio-story of this move is really convincing, just like a few years earlier she had told about a minor exodus in geographical and social terms, with creatives and hipsters leaving Manhattan for Brooklyn (2009). We are faced with settlement sand extraction models that move where the bone still has some meat around it, and when this ends, either you change the type of food or you move to another restaurant. All in all, this idea rests on a model of temporal development that is fairly linear, where the environment is an exogenous variable, on which we intervene, modeling it to the point of destroying it, but which seems (seemed) to have little autonomy, little feedback, little agency. My impression is that in Zukin's view, the environment affects temporalities only in an episodic and reduced way.

Bad luck (or luck, who knows?) was that the volume was completed just before the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, and it came out during our first relationship with COVID-19. Zukin promptly reacted with a couple of brilliant texts on how digital worlds behaved differently to the new global crisis, and on what urban form we could expect if the wounds left by the pandemic were deep and radical (Zukin, 2020b, 2021). Two years after that, the signs are still strongly contradictory. A part of the world of offices, on whose construction so much of the real estate capital of the previous three decades was based, is still empty or under-utilized. Basically, what could have also been a radical challenge for anyone of us, that is to imagine working worlds disconnected from the living and residential worlds has being stopped (perhaps only for now) in the face of the organizational needs of capital to control work closely (with antiquate tools from the twentieth century such as control by proximity and by the eye). At the same time, however, some discontinuities have certainly occurred: as I write this few pages, the glaciers of the Alps are experiencing structural subsidence due to rising temperatures and changing air currents; the heat waves so well captured by Klinenberg (2015) have become normal and violent in much of the northern hemisphere; the link between climate change and the health dimension is now accepted by all governments. Continuity and discontinuity overlap, providing new opportunities for the predatory formations mentioned by Sassen (2014), but also theoretical and empirical challenges unimaginable even just a few years ago. How to transform, for example, the socio-history that Zukin carries on at least from her *Loft Living* (1989) with theoretical and methodological tools from climatological, atmospheric or ethological derivation?

Basically, the question here is: are we really facing a discontinuity? If the answer is yes, perhaps political ecology, as it has evolved over the years thanks to the works of Swyngedouw & Heynen (2003) or Gandy (2004), among the many scholars of this fascinating field, is only part of the answer that we should give to a new world that it appears from the ruins of capitalism, as Anna Tsing invites us to think. Or we might think that the innovation complex is also becoming internal to our disciplines, and we are just trying to pour new wine within the same old bottles again and again. Are we trapped in the old and lasting paradox concerning our ability to understand reality, that is, the more everything changes, the more everything remains fundamentally the same?

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