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Back to Babel

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Particularly over the years 1980 and early 1990s, architects, engineers and technicians of various professional areas, we found ourselves at odds with a wide range of debates and speeches, meanings, practices and preachings, all from the action of the new social movements organized around housing production. Much of this movement was engaged in the construction of an alternative that politically allowed to conceive another way to produce the city and the home. We thought that self-management mechanisms applied in the production of projects and works, would allow the appearance of a form of autonomy which would launch - this we believed - a vertigo of libertarian actions that would pass beyond the restricted field of the immediate response to a material need: a decent place to live in.

We used to share knowledge, expertise and information of all sorts, paired in an unusual confluence of theoretical and practical horizons, and that seemed to call, finally, some consonance between words and things. The coexistence between the universe depicted by architects and engineers and the polymorphic reality brought by the movements made us talk in the midst of a vortex of meanings which condensed a peculiar understanding of "democracy" (the "direct", of course), "autonomy", "self-organization" and even the hackneyed "conquest of citizenship", or more radical contractions such as "transformation of society." It seemed sure that we would not lose, erecting towers within that Babel of senses and polysemic meanings.

In the biblical Babel, there was a belief that the tower would provide some opportunity to see and touch the Almighty: according to the biblical text, the exhortation was for men to unite in building a city and a tower whose top would reach to heaven, which would make famous the names of those involved in its construction. For the toil required, however, some prior steps were necessary: "And they said one to another, Come, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. The bricks served them for stone, and bitumen for mortar" (Genesis 11:3). By the order of events, we can not avoid to imagine the frantic task organization, the smoke from fires for heating large pots to soften the bitumen, little platforms on wheels delivering bricks between the fronts for elevating the masonry, hundreds of men trampling the clay to dissolve its lumps and to prepare it for the molds, molds already sprinkled with a thin layer of sand to facilitate to unmold, etc. etc.. The city comes as the order which supports the whole enterprise, the tower rises led by a desire for power. Step by step, row by row, the tower rises slowly. Until the moment when God realizes (!) what is happening and, unfortunately for humans, turns his wrath on them, messing up and shuffling significant and significations, senses and meanings, forms and contents, words and things. The myth says that the entire enterprise went bankrupt: the works were abandoned, the tower fell and the town disappeared. Men eventually spread throughout the Earth, who knows how people gathered around what cultural or linguistic affinities that, as of Babel, were then reorganized.

If the myth lends some sense – even mythic – to the present world's cultural polymorph, the antinomies of our time do not account for the myths in the past. That set of skills and knowledge that coexisted – and still co-exist – when we share actions with the movements for housing (both with the Homeless and with the Landless): words and things. If they don't present competing meanings, at least they are crossed by a myriad of subtleties and ambiguities that make us escape the slips that spread us, shuffling the true sense of the actions. Just as if in front of a mirror, we are dealing with the underside of the meanings we thought to share: if we reach some autonomy, it is the one artfully – or not – sought by the neoliberal state, justifying it to rid itself of its obligations; if we consolidate some productive self-determination, it is the one that allows a self-starter to compete freely, from its own effort, as a merchant bartering some consumers of what he can independently produce in his backyard.

The more self-organization advances as an alternative to organize the work force, the more frequent is the force that professes it as a legitimate argument for the deregulation of production and discharge of Capital versus labor. "Everyone makes their own history" becomes, thus, a rough and wicked ditty, sung ironically by the all-powerful then. And yet, we are not saying that the senses are other, if we update them to the present time. Just as in a hidden lexicon, these same senses were the ones that coexisted with those apparently agreed upon. I.e., both we and the movements were talking on "autonomy". But if some chance of coexistence between meanings was given in the phonetic conformation of terms, this possibility did not necessarily mean a consensus on the action – rather, yes, a conflict between

conceptions and dispute between ideological constructions (our old "imaginary inversion of reality", as taught by Marilena Chauí) (Chauí and Franco, 1978, p.9).

And yet, would it be worthy to state our useless efforts and those even legitimate beliefs of yesteryear? If it comes down to heteronomy, for what we cherish any libertarian shudder? We continue to build cities and towers, also driven by a desire for power, but now under the command of other kinds of power – "I can do everything through Capital who strengthens me," changing the God of Babel by our god of accumulation. Paradoxically, our new Babel brings us together, but now by the tremendous ideological confusion which subordinates us to practice, scrambled by the unified thought determined by the orders of the expanded accumulation.

What remains – at least – and what paradoxically at the end we put in coexistence, is what Deleuze called "vacuoles of non-communication". If everything, and even the words are infected, and perhaps even "rotten" (Deleuze, 1992, p.217), it is our right the unyielding defense of silence brought about by the encounter between the clay and the potter's mould, when the brick that germinates from it shows some possibility of agreement between Technique and Politics. In these times – and since then – what we do care – and did care formerly, we know it now – is to build not only the overcoming of the narrowness of senses that locks our eyes, but the curve of a future time which enables us to think of technology as political practice – and, necessary to say, in the strongest sense of the term, of course.

References

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