

The “explosion of the city” and the trajectory of capitalism

Bruno Lamas

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“Capitalist production seeks continually to overcome these immanent barriers but overcomes them only by means which again place the barriers in its way and on a more formidable scale. The real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself”.

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3

For some years now, the remarkable historical fact that the world today is a predominantly urban place has been evident, and now more than half of the world’s population lives in cities. But this recurring observation seems to forever be accompanied by two contradictory sentiments: on the one hand, a kind of celebration of what appears to be considered in itself an achievement of civilization yet, on the other, a deep sense of dread, due to the fact that we are not exactly sure how we got here in first place, while, all around us, the problems usually associated with urbanization seem to be constantly increasing and the general trend is not expected to refrain.

It is extremely difficult to accurately estimate the urban share of the world population in pre-modern ages. What we do know is that after eight thousand years of urbanization, the urban share of the world population in 1800 was just 2% and that, from then on, it progressed rapidly, reaching 30% in 1950, 47% in 2000 and, according to the United Nations, exceeded 50% in 2008. What seems relatively clear is that the force of modern urban growth has no equivalent in pre-modern societies. However, it is not difficult to see that in pre-modern ages the urbanization of a city was quite independent of the urbanization (or decline) of another, whereas modern society constitutes a truly global urban system in which the urbanization of certain areas is not independent of what happens elsewhere in the world. This global urban

¹ Translation revised by Tiago Miller (tiago-miller-translations@outlook.com).

system is actually little more than the territorial expression of the worldwide system of abstract labor and which forms the foundations of capitalism, something that no statistical estimation can reveal alone. Therefore, the problem of modern urbanization is not just a quantitative question or one concerning a change of pace in the growth of cities; it is about the actual relation between cities and capitalism.

Of course, the problem could be overcome if we simply declared, as Fernand Braudel does, that “capitalism and towns were basically the same thing in the West” (Braudel 1985: 514) or that “money meant towns” (Braudel 1985: 511). This not only affirms an identity between city, capitalism and money, but also presupposes a trans-historical identity of each of the phenomena involved. The pre-modern and modern city are the same thing; capitalism was born in the Neolithic and money was always capital, or rather, one is on the right path of not understanding anything about cities, capitalism or money. Few things are so conceptually disastrous and ideologically consequential as the retro-projection of modern categories and specific phenomena (labor, money, capital, market, etc.) in all societies of the past or its hypostatization as attributes of “human nature”.

The fact that the city is not a specifically modern phenomenon does not mean that we can give it the same trans-historical identity that has been developing since the Neolithic. The positivist ideological understanding that simply verifies the historical-empirical continuity of the urban artifact and its material inertia will never see cities as something beyond a heap of stones, bricks and cement. Against this vulgar positivism the classical distinction between the city as human association - *civitas* - and the city as a place and physical artifact -*urbs* - is not entirely useless. What is needed, however, is a fundamental correction of the tendentially “politician” modern interpretation of the concept of *civitas*, which only regards it as sequential political forms of human association, consciously chosen and without any presuppositions. Employing this mode of thought, it serves to conceal the unconscious nature of all forms of social integration and consciousness that have existed until now, as well as the corresponding autonomized “aprioristic matrices” (Robert Kurz) of human perception and action; exactly what Marx tried to grasp with his concept of “fetishism”. This fetishistic moment was clearly present in the original meaning of the Roman concept of *civitas*, which accordingly extolled the transcendental and

aprioristic character of the entire Roman social structure (as a metaphysical social bond above the citizens) and, among other things, expressed itself in specific religious celebrations in the sacred act of the foundation of cities, most of which still exist today. It may, however, be important to assume that the distinction *civitas/urbs* is, essentially, the difference between the *process (social)* and the *result (material)* intrinsic to urbanization. Nevertheless, the former is far from being truly conscious for the agents themselves, while the latter survives historically to the forms of social integration that originally gave birth to them.

But how can this help us understand the relation between cities and the historical development of capitalism? It seems to me that this should be done via a deeper analysis of four main problems: 1) by making a crystal clear differentiation between pre-capitalist and capitalist cities, both in their different social fetishistic forms as in their corresponding urban forms; 2) the historical process of the constitution of capital, i.e., the problem of the "transition from feudalism to capitalism" and the role of cities in this process; 3) the logic and internal functioning of capitalism "already moving on its own foundation" (Marx 1973: 253), i.e., the progressive territorialization of capitalism as a "labor society" and a "mode of production based on value", most notably since the second half of the nineteenth century, leading to the "urban explosion" of last century; and 4) the territorial expression of the world crisis on the global urban system. Naturally, I cannot explore all of these issues here but I can try to delimit the problems and discuss where the retro-projection of modern categories is more common.

One of the recurring anachronisms is seeking to explain the origin of cities through the "market". Employing this clearly ideological line of thought, Jericho (8000 BC) and Çatal Huyuk (7500 BC), or at least Ur (3800 BC) and Uruk (4000 BC), already stood out as major markets or even as important sites of "simple commodity production". With more or less the same emphasis, this idea appears in authors as diverse as Braudel and Jane Jacobs and, naturally, there is already talk of the existence of labor, money, value and capital. Traditional Marxism also participated in the ontologization of modern categories, trying to empirically demonstrate Engels' thesis on "the part played by labor in the transition from ape to Man" and the theory that the "law of

value” had “general economic validity” for at least “five or seven millennia” (Engels 1991: 1037).

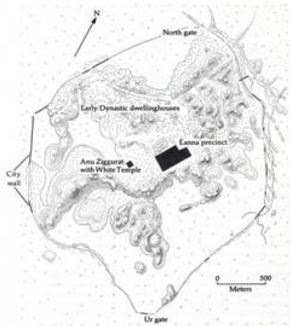


Fig. 1
Ur (3800 a.C.)



Fig. 2
Uruk (4000 a.C.)

Thereby, modern attempts to explain the genesis of the first cities without resorting to modern categories of market, merchandise, labor, etc. have always been in the minority and undervalued, such as those of Rykwert (1988) and Mumford (1961), which emphasized the religious character of early human occupations, including the level of urban form itself. However, even in the founding texts of our modern understanding of the origin of cities some clues shed light on the specific fetishistic character of pre-modern societies and their religious matrix: the Marxist archaeologist Gordon Childe, for instance, in his classic essay “The Urban Revolution”, notes that one of the ten distinctive characteristics of the first cities was that “each primary producer paid over the tiny surplus he could wring from the soil with his still very limited technical equipment as tithe or tax to an imaginary deity or a divine king who thus concentrated the surplus. Without this concentration, owing to the low productivity of the rural economy, no effective capital would have been available” (Childe 1950: 11-2). Despite the obvious anachronisms of talking about the existence of “economy”, “tithe”, “tax” and “capital” in the Neolithic period, Childe does not fail to recognize that the recipient of this share of the material surplus is a transcendent entity or a deified human, thus posing a real problem for his understanding of history as “class struggle”. This personification of a transcendent principle that characterizes the religious form and crosses pre-modern societies’ whole social structure subsisted, with more or less the same intensity, until the constitution of the modern capitalist world. But in this world, the aprioristic social principle is no longer *personified* in any one human being but rather *objectified* in commodities and money (on this see Kurz, 2014). The story of this transformation was also territorialized.

Despite the many differences between pre-modern cities, there is a common element that, although not absolute, does distinguish them from modern cities: walls. Several historians have drawn attention to this question but it seems to me that their conclusions are far from being sufficiently explored. The overwhelming majority of pre-modern cities were walled; although rare, the exceptions are noted and justified, either by the natural landscape of the city or region (e.g.: Venice, or England and Japan) or the existence of an overwhelmingly stable theocracy or military power that rendered walls unnecessary (e.g.: ancient Egypt, Sparta). Accordingly, for pre-modern

societies a city without walls was absolutely unthinkable. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the words in English, German, Dutch, Russian and Chinese used today to mean “city” were originally used to mean “wall” (or similar words such as fence, bulwark, rampart, etc.) The accepted understanding is that medieval wall structures survived until the advent of the modern world and that from the nineteenth century onwards they were gradually demolished to make way for modern urban expansions. However, in my view, this narrative is much more complicated and the so-called “originary accumulation of capital” can help us to understand it in greater depth.

On the so-called “transition from feudalism to capitalism” – historically limited by the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries – two classic controversies are now considered integral to understanding the role of cities in the capitalist constitution: the “Dobb-Sweezy Debate” (see Hilton, 1978), developed in the 1950s, being exclusively intra-Marxist; and the so-called “Brenner Debate” (Aston and Philpin 1995), developed in the second half of the 1970s, maintaining a broader theoretical and disciplinary nature. Both debates, more or less explicitly, had the city in the background of the discussion, without paying close attention to the profound urban transformations of that period. What was at play, and once again in an anachronistic way, was the city as a market and nothing more. However, a question posited several times in both debates but never truly investigated in depth was the lords’ growing need for new sources of revenue to feed the wars of the period. And here we comprehend the city as much more than mere background.

It is necessary to bear in mind that what is involved in categorical terms in the transition from feudalism to capitalism is the historical process of the “transformation of money into capital” (Marx). We know that money existed before capitalism, but by no means can its social function be considered the same as that in capitalism. In pre-modern societies money had a religious function or one that mediated relations of reciprocity and personal obligation (gifts, counter-gifts, offerings, sacrifices, etc.), themselves also markedly religious. This, however, can in no way be compared to the autonomized logic of “abstract wealth” (Marx) and the “incarnation of abstract labor” (Marx) so specific to capitalism. Several historians and anthropologists, such as Karl Polanyi (2001), Jacques Le Goff (1980; 2012) and Marcel Mauss (2001), have

provided clues to this differentiation, but have yet to be studied in a systematic way (unlike Robert Kurz (2014), who seeks to do this in his recent book *Money without value*). Therefore, we can in no way say that pre-modern societies had an “economy”; a reminder made long ago by Moses Finley (1999) regarding Greco-Roman antiquity, and Polanyi in a more comprehensive way with his thesis on the “disembeddedness” of capitalist economy. The economy, as an autonomous sphere, detached from social relations, and characterized by an impersonal and anonymous market is something specific to capitalist society. What is being considered here is money as presupposition and the goal of production – a "god of commodities" (Marx) or self-valorizing value, i.e. capital.

What deeper investigation may show to be absolutely essential to the “transformation of money into capital” are the demands imposed by what historiography calls the “military revolution”, i.e. the historical structural processes associated with the invention of firearms in the fourteenth century and the formation of modern military and state machines that ensured the supremacy of white European man in the subsequent centuries (here we follow Kurz, 2014). This involved, on one hand, the invention of the cannon in the fifteenth century and the formation and maintenance of mercenary armies (the first real wage earners) and, on the other, brutal and corresponding architectural transformations in the fortification of cities, which combined became a truly insatiable monster of resources, promoting the brutal monetization of all social reproduction and the constitution of capital.

Concerning artillery, what we have is the first arms race, marked by increasing demand for metals, the development of mining and steel industries, and the emergence of a proto firearms industry. We also see remarkable changes when it comes to urban fortifications: the old medieval walls ceased to fulfill its function against the cannon; new, lower, yet substantially wider walls were erected with increased internal maneuvering space allowing for the movement of cannons to defend the city; in the end, the space required for the new wall was, in most cases, always larger than the area of the city itself (Mumford 1961: 358-9; Kostof 1992: 31). These new fortifications that employed the famous star configuration (the so-called *trace italienne*), with the best example perhaps being the Italian city of Palmanova, were extremely difficult to erect and even more so to modify. They required a mobilization

of resources equivalent to the proto-arms industry, and together caused widespread monetization of all taxes across Europe and the corresponding extortion of the population in order to feed the ascendancy of a state military machine detached from social reproduction. No wonder that Marx notes: “In the period of the rising of absolute monarchy with its transformation of all taxes into money taxes, money indeed appears as the moloch to whom real wealth is sacrificed” (Marx 1973: 199).

Fig. 3. Illustration of Leonhard Fronsperger's (c.1520-1575) *Kriegsbuch* (1573).

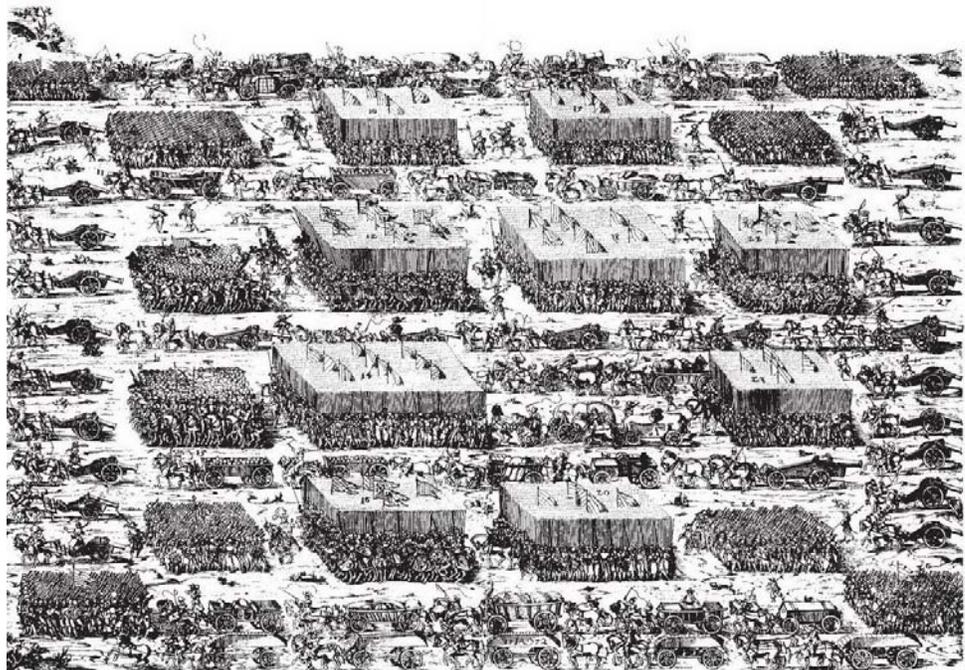


Fig. 4. Illustration of Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban's (1633-1707) book *Maniere de Fortifier* (1689)



Fig. 5. The city of Palmanova, in Italy, is perhaps the most complete example of the star shaped *trace italienne*. It's construction began in 1593 and lasted until c. 1810.

In the case of walls, their role can even be considered twofold: while they served as a defense from heavy artillery they also fulfilled the money drainer role of customs border. Thus, money took over all social production and reproduction in a top down and bloody way, and it was through this extremely violent process that capital-cities, and what we in the modern age call “state” and “economy”, came into being. With it also came “free labour and the exchange of this free labour for money, in order to reproduce and to realize money” (Marx 1973: 471).

Fig. 6. The city of Dunkerque (France) in 1575 (top) and about 1700 to 1710 (below). Since the late seventeenth century, the city became one of the twelve major large fortifications that Vauban at the time designed for the constitution of the French border defense system. The scale and speed of the interventions that the city suffered makes it a paradigmatic case of the profound changes associated with the "political economy of firearms" (Robert Kurz) between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

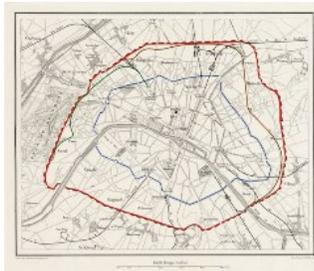


Fig. 7. Mid-19th century Paris map .The Ferme Générale on blue.

But as Marx (1973: 524) also said: “Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier”. In this sense, the new walls were soon to prove themselves an obstacle to the full establishment of capitalism. On the one hand, the formation of the modern state had become superfluous to its defensive function, while on the other, the dissolution of personal ties associated with feudal landownership as a result of the transformation of land into a commodity had promoted a completely monetised appraisal of the spaces occupied by walls across hundreds of European cities. The first sign of such changes was in Paris. The storming of the Bastille, which “officially” marks the beginning of French Revolution, was preceded by a perhaps even more significant event: two days earlier, a widespread popular revolt against a wall built by Louis XVI (called the *Ferme Générale*) and designed by architect Claude-Nicholas Ledoux culminated in the sacking and burning of several customs offices.

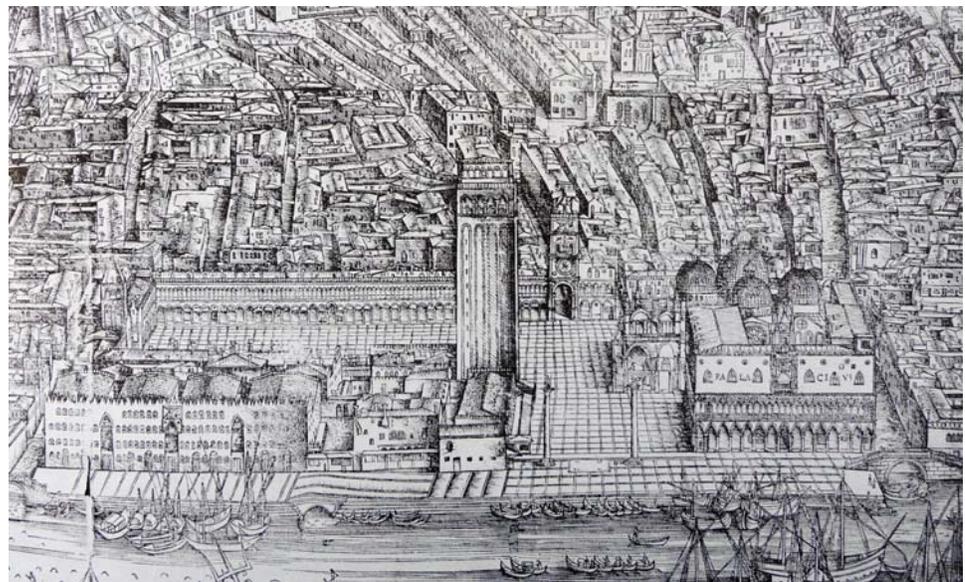
Thus far we have limited ourselves geographically to what goes on *outside* and at the city *gates*. But the process of the constitution of capital was promoted alongside what was occurring *within* cities. Considering value as an “abstract form of wealth” based on “labor power expended without regard to the mode of its expenditure” (Marx), whose magnitude is measured in time, it is clear that temporality is a fundamental component of the constitution of capitalism. Following clues given by medievalists, the American historian Moishe Postone (2003) paved the way for a promising critical interpretation of modern temporality. After population growth in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, medieval towns began to develop a greater need for the regulation

of social time. Some authors have argued that it was the material needs of density and the complexity of urban life that led to the development of constant hours in western medieval cities. Postone argues, however, and in our view correctly, that the emergence of abstract temporal form characteristic of modern society cannot be properly grasped in terms of the nature of urban life *per se*. After all, there were already major cities elsewhere in the world long before the development of constant hours in western medieval towns; and moreover, by the fourteenth century, the work day in medieval Europe continued to be measured in a natural way by the traditional sun-to-sun time lapse, instituted by 'church time' (*Horae canonicae*). In this sense, the reason for the emergence of constant hours should be based on a particular socio-cultural form and not on a general material factor such as urban concentration or technological advancement (Postone, 2003: 209).

For Postone, work bells were an expression of a new social form that had begun to appear in the late Middle Ages, particularly in cloth-producing towns, such as those of Flanders. Initially, cloth merchants paid the workers a daily wage; this meant that, during the economic crisis of the late thirteenth century which profoundly affected the industry, weavers were extremely vulnerable to poverty, prompting them to demand the extension of the working day beyond the traditional sun-to-sun day, in order to increase their wages (we should not forget that wealth was still measured by the absolute production of fabric). According to Le Goff, it was precisely at this stage, and as a form of control by merchants of the 'real' dimension of the working day, that municipal work bells spread across medieval European cities, ending the historical domain of church time. It did not take long for bells to give way to mechanical clocks, yet with variable hours. During the second half of the fourteenth century, several municipal single hand clock towers spread throughout the European urban world, which slowly began to rule the entirety of urban daily life. At the end of the century, the abstract homogeneous temporality of twenty-four hours was already serving as a temporal ordering of various specific works in major urban European centers, and with it the Middle Ages city gained a new meaning. As the noted medievalist Aron Gurevich stated: "I said above that the towns became the proprietors of their own time, and this is true in the sense that it was the towns which took time away from ecclesiastical control. But it is also true that it was precisely in the towns that man began to lose his proprietary grip on time altogether; from the realisation that time

flowed on regardless of men and events, it was but a short step to man's subordination to the tyranny of time. Time imposes its own rhythm on men, making them work more quickly, hurry; not a moment must be lost." Gurevich 1985: 150). This "tyranny of time" is basically the tyranny of the "valorization of value" (Marx) as an emerging social fetishistic form, mediated by parallel state coercion and the detached military machine. This interpretation could also give new meaning to Le Goff's statement that "the century of the clock was also the century of the cannon" (Le Goff 1980: 50).

Fig. 8.
Engraving of St. Mark's Square (Venice) dated 1500. At the center, in the back, the St. Mark's clocktower, inaugurated in the previous year.



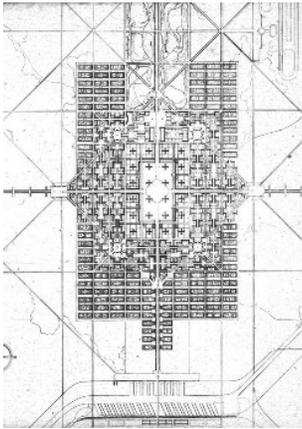
As Kurz tells us, before constituting the entirety of social life "time started to become abstract, independent and absolute only in a particular social space, which is precisely the detached functional space of business economy" (Kurz 2004). Within the historical process of the "valorization of value" there emerges a *social, temporal and spatial dissociation* of production activities in relation to all other activities and moments of everyday social reproduction, which are henceforth to be regarded as an obstacle to 'productivity', a notion which then began to emerge. Thus, it is not the definition of a mere space of material goods production; rather it is a *space of valorization* of abstract labor and "abstract wealth". The historical and social relevance of this decoupling is most evident in the *work-residence separation*, but actually it is not exactly a separation; we are not facing *the simple separation of two things that were together but rather the constitution of both separately*. Pre-modern everyday life is an integrated social whole, in which, properly speaking, there is neither work nor

residence; it was capitalism that constituted such detached spheres that mutually presuppose each other, while assigning each one a specific sexual connotation: men are for work and the valorization of “abstract wealth” spaces, while women belong in domestic spaces and those involving the material-sensitive consumption of commodities.

What gradually became generalized and consolidated, especially from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, was a *definition of the city as a space of concentration and valorization of abstract labor*. Hence we are witnessing the widespread social and spatial separation of human practices, expanding from factories to urban space, with the first example being perhaps the works of Hausmann in Paris. Here we can begin to speak of capitalism as a social totality constituted as a “labor society”, or, as Marx put it, of the functioning of capitalism “on its own foundation”.

The temporal form of measuring “abstract wealth” implies a contradictory and dynamic relation between value and abstract labor, and abstract wealth and material productivity. Mediated by competition, this contradiction is intrinsic to the “valorization of value” and implies a very particular historical and geographical trajectory: an increasing material productivity in increasingly smaller temporal units and a corresponding need for market expansion. In other words, the “valorization of value” is a dynamic and objective social process of increasing temporal intensity (productivity) and progressive geographic expansiveness (world market). This process gives modernity an internal, objective and unconscious dynamic, completely unknown in pre-modern societies. While in these societies the social metaphysical principle remained transcendent and functioned as *a personified religious matrix of reference and social stabilization*, the social metaphysics of the “valorization of value” is a *systematic process of objectification in commodities*, thus becoming immanent in the world and giving it a *historical dynamic of a blind and brutal social transformation*, which, of course, includes modern urbanization and the current global urban system.

Evidently, supporting all this is the irremediable basilar contradiction of the relation of capital: while it needs to absorb abstract labor to the highest possible degree, it also requires competition to create increased productivity through which labor-power becomes superfluous and is subsequently replaced by objectified capital in the form of machinery. This contradiction has a known compensation mechanism that, put simply,



is expressed in the system's capacity to absorb, with each increase in productivity, larger absolute quantities of labor-power than those that were eliminated by the rationalization or introduction of machinery. An example was Fordism: while the assembly line reduced the working time for each commodity, it also allowed the absorption of larger absolute amounts of labor-power. The result was a fully-fledged "labor society", that is, the beginning of global urbanization and the progressive cheapening of commodities originally sold as luxury goods (i.e. cars, refrigerators, washing machines, etc.). Dating from this period are the functionalist urbanism theses of CIAM, where the metaphysics of labor and the abstract temporality of the valorization of value are evident, especially in Le Corbusier, for whom "the city is a working tool" (Corbusier 1925: 10) and urban planning should "help give birth to the joy of work" (Corbusier 1946: 71-2), while also arguing that "the cycle of the solar day of twenty-four hours will forever give rhythm to human activities" (1946: 32) and that "the city that offers speed has success" (1925: 182).

It is clear that the internal compensation mechanism of the capitalist trajectory can only be effective as long as the speed of product innovation is higher than the speed of innovation within the productive process. But within the context of the 3rd Industrial Revolution of micro-electronics, the relation is reversed and, for the first time, the rationalization and scientification of productive forces become superfluous more labor-power than they can absorb. And this is not just the case with individuals but of entire regions, countries and continents. Abstract labor, which until now had functioned as a fetishistic form of social integration, thus reveals itself to be what it always has been: an extremely violent form of social exclusion. This has been, for some time, notorious in the urbanization of Africa, a continent unable to compete in the global market and where, contrary to the history of European urbanization, hyper-urbanization has occurred without corresponding job creation. In addition, for some time now the phenomenon of mass-structural unemployment has reached megacities at the center of the abstract labor world system. If we add fictitious capital-financed urbanization and the increasing maintenance costs of urban social infrastructure – unproductive from the point of view of capital and itself guaranteed by public debt – it appears that the current feeling of dread within the global capitalist urban system is justified. After the "urban explosion" of the last two centuries, many cities are running the serious risk of becoming true "powder kegs".

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