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THINKING OF THE METROPOLIS WITH A DIFFERENCE

Cultural space is not just a topographical metaphor. As Ewa Rewers stresses, it may be tantamount to embracing the fact that "public communication takes place in a framework that can be discussed but one that cannot be replaced by the discussion."¹ The researcher is mainly interested in art and architecture which shape communicative communities. However, if her insights are given a metaphysical twist, then the notion of cultural space being irreplaceable by discussion has a fundamental, and not just communicative, meaning. Space is referred to not only in topographical, physical or communicative terms but also, most importantly, in experiential terms, which leads one to perceive communities as not simply social but first and foremost as cultural. It is the cultural space that resonates with *ethnos*, the particularity of the place, its *genius loci*, intimate understanding of its natural surroundings, etc. Behind the cultural valence there is however still something more – a metaphysical community. The space is more meaningful than the word. The shift from one to the other makes it possible to ask the question what it means to characterize a given cultural space as particular, unique, or one that may contribute to living a good life.

The recognition of human and natural forces has to find its reflection in the landscape of cultural experience. I do not trust the communities that disregard the rhythms of cultural and natural territory, rendering its unique voice inaudible. Good spaces involve a separate and unique way of thinking that resonates within us and is manifested without when we are situated in a given place. It strikes others with difference and yet we too are appalled by its otherness. This kind of thinking is not only social but also metaphysical. Cultural identity does not rest on the social attributes of "us" and "them", nor does it reside in the well-known ethnographical inventory of cuisine, custom and belief. It is the essential that we are only beginning to take root in: the recognition of space-time

¹ Ewa Rewers: *Miasto – twórczość. Wykłady krakowskie* [City – Artistic Work. Cracow Lectures], Kraków 2010, p. 32.

continuum, the distance from oneself and from the others, the attachment to fate and necessity, the silence one needs to keep, the focus on the accidental, the affirmation of either stability or changeability, the thinking in terms of the fragment, detail or whole, the receptivity to the infinite, the experience of living, the attachment to a certain geometrical order, etc.

Still, in order to trust the space in the real sense, so that it is not just a short-term social construction whose meaning is reducible to its social serviceability, one needs something more. Strong cultural spaces do not exhaust their meaning by demonstrating their particularity but they seek to make space for multiple influences, to accommodate a multitude of everyday practices and to create spheres of experimentation with the place and its tenacity. At the same time, they do not allow unification and the triumphant march of globalizing dullness. These are not spaces that are merely crossed by others or passed by. They do not impose the necessity of settlement, they do not make one stay within their bounds, but what they do require is the recognition of the distinct value of local places and practices of living. The strength of the place strikes us with its particularity and the easiness with which that particularity is manifested.

The metropolis can be first and foremost recognized by expansive thinking, and only secondly by mere administration processes that have a vast range because they encompass different areas of activity bound to nearby towns, or cities, or – most often – districts. The metropolis is a space of multi-focus architectonic experimentation² that ventures to transcend the limits of the former space while retaining its original character. These tangible architectonic fireworks coexist with the fireworks in the educational, economic, liberal, moral, artistic, etc. sphere. Within the metropolis, open-mindedness replaces the sense of “primordial ties” that anthropologists have been so fond of talking about.³ The story of blood, ancestry, customs, religion and language loses its transparency, which does not mean that Geertz’s “identity package”⁴ has faded into oblivion. The metropolis is marked by a vast range of its instrumental thinking and action.

² Cf. projects based on space which have been carried out in metropolises: *The Contested Metropolis. Six Cities at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, ed. Raffaele Paloscia, Basel 2004.

³ Edward Shils: „Naród, narodowość i nacjonalizm a społeczeństwo obywatelskie” [Nation, Nationality, Nationalism and the Civic Society], trans. K. Kwaśniewski, *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, 1996, no. 5, pp. 9-30.

⁴ Clifford Geertz: *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, pp. 261-263.

The vast range of thinking is a culmination in the development of urban culture which is however more detectable in the network of correlations between cities, towns, settlements, villages, and all kinds of territories. Metropolises, as distinct points on the map of territorial thinking, circulate popular ideas, reinforcing them through repetition and encouraging the mutation of thoughts and cultural practices. This kind of “expansion” of fashion, cultural trends and patterns of behaviour is discussed by Roberto Salvadori.⁵ On the one hand, the metropolis radiates its influence on its surroundings; on the other hand, there is no metropolis without the reinforcing context that provides a corrective to metropolitan thinking. The context places constraints on the artificiality and excessive experimentation of the centre. What I am interested in here is the fact that the metropolis lives both separately and together with its others. And it is out of the right proportion between the two that the particularity of the place arises.

Undoubtedly, the metropolis can be described as a connection and collaboration between smaller organisms. It is still a potent metaphor for architects and city planners, who view the combination of natural elements and urban texture as a chance to animate the space. This is perhaps best exemplified by the ideas presented in The Pop-Up City blog, which strives to articulate the notions and strategies capable of shaping the city of the future. Thanks to the new technologies and the architecture that draws on nature, the city becomes quite literally a living being, as evidenced in the projects of Rachel Armstrong, who cooperates with architects and researchers to make use of the building materials that have living capacities and can stimulate the “growth” of architecture.⁶ Armstrong hopes to be able to build sustainable cities by connecting them back to nature – and so the limestone reef is supposed to rescue Venice from sinking and to instill environmental thinking in its inhabitants.

Nevertheless, the organic metaphor is not the most significant one to describe the anthropological dimension of a place. The metropolis is not an organism of the kind that is sustained by the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century belief in the being dependent on the collaboration of organs which combined to create the

⁵ Roberto Salvadori: „Miasto mieszczańskie” [Bourgeois City], trans. Halina Kralowa, *Architektura*, 2005, no. 2.

⁶ Joëlle Payet: *Architecture That Grows And Repairs Itself*, “The Pop-Up City” 2011, May 24, <http://www.popucity.net/2011/05/architecture-that-grows-and-repairs-itself/> [date of access: 2.11.2012].

whole of social life. The metropolis is not an organization. The metropolis lives, but if it were a living organism in the biological sense transplanted onto the social sphere, it would be difficult to notice this residual living. It would be still more difficult to bring together its rough and uncoordinated experiences which are not tangible enough and therefore escape objective observation. And even though the story of the city's heart, tissue, bodily surface, arteries, lungs and so on is well situated in our public space, as is the reference to the adaptation to the environment, I would rather frame the metropolis at a distance from Herbert Spencer's evolutionist perspective.⁷ I think the myth of the perfect cooperation of parts is what should be resisted and marginalized in our thinking.

I find it also difficult to comply with the notion of the metropolis as a system. The term itself is satisfying on the epistemic level only to theoreticians working on model images of thinking and action. I do not share Ludwig von Bertalanffy's fascination with the potentialities of a general system theory,⁸ since it is difficult to believe in the "palpability" of its approach to the world. It is still harder to justify its generalizing manner of speculation. Whether the system has a biological, cybernetic or economic reference, it becomes all too easy as an intellectual practice capable of discovering the principles that govern complex holistic structures. This is due to the movement of thought which is as sweeping as it is totalizing and simplifying. The generality and unity of such thinking about nature, society or artificial structures makes me consider the metropolis in quite different terms. Despite the fact that the systems narrative had an impact on Talcott Parson's or Niklas Luhmann's respective theories, I prefer to situate the experience of the place away from social engineering. It has always been alien to me, as it has never been sufficient for a theory that struggles to preserve sensuality, to be a sort of theoretical "sensorium" so that the fragility of experience is still retained as a vital quality. The notion of a system is useless when one attempts to describe experience or point to locations where a human being is present, as it is of little use in tracing the "thickness" of a place. It is to be regretted that one has to say farewell to the systems theory as it is a tool which

⁷ Cf. Herbert Spencer: *The Principles of Sociology*, Charleston 2009.

⁸ Ludwig von Bertalanffy: *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications*. New York 1968.

both easy to apply in its procedures of verification or falsification, and spectacular in terms of effects, making the scientific narrative coherent and unequivocal.

The metropolis is not a simple machine marked by its teleological character and specialization of its units, although the machine-related vocabulary is still capable of producing new metaphors that respond to our need for innovation. It is not just the modernist poet's appeal for constructing a singing city machine.⁹ It refers both to the seventeenth-century idea and to a modern formula that has several versions. The machine metaphor may relate to the network of consumption, market processes, local government in its functioning, globalization processes, social regulations, urban policies or an ideological machine. The problem is discussed by Kevin R. Cox in his 1999 book, which by referring to Harvey Molotch's 1976 work attempts to re-examine the machinery of practical urban ideologies which unify the phenomena at the local level and marginalize the existent racial and ethnic divisions or other social differences. Cox also strives to frame the ideological machinery of local community, which is tied to some preconceptions that make us celebrate the locality of a social group in the "we feeling" formula, while contributing to the formation of a sense of collective identity at the local level.¹⁰ The focus on machinery can also yield a description of the city as a machine of entertainment, as Terry Nichols Clark does in his work, showing that the former ways of thinking about locality were too simple and that the question of finding someone's position within the city is a question of what they are close to, meaning places of entertainment and consumption, or urban facilities.¹¹ The city thus becomes the business machine of entertainment, tourism, consumption, residence, leadership and administration, which are all means to programme comfortable collective living.

The notion of the city as a machine may also concern the networked space which is able, through its mapping of local connections, to build urban relations.

⁹ Tadeusz Peiper: „Rano” [Morning], in: Idem: *Pisma wybrane* [Selected Writings], ed.. S. Jaworski, Warszawa 1979, p. 169.

¹⁰ Kevin R. Cox: *Ideology and the Growth Coalition*, in: *The Urban Growth Machine: Critical Perspectives Two Decades Later*, ed. Andrew E.G. Jonas, David Wilson, New York 1999, pp. 21-22.

¹¹ Terry Nichols Clark: *Introduction: Talking Entertainment Seriously*, in: *The City As an Entertainment Machine. Research in Urban Policy*, ed. Terry Nichols Clark, Oxford 2004, vol. 9, pp. 1-18.

Finally, it can denote a political or financial machine behind the city. In any case, what is at stake here is an automatically reproduced and repeated procedure that sustains urban existence. So construed, the city turns out to be a manifestly technologized, informational and cybernetic monster. The contemporary ways of thinking about the city and the metropolis still cling on to aspects of machinery but more in the sense of a computer network, cyberspace, or a virtual city that combines electronic means of communication and formerly independent urban structure. And even though the characterization amounts to a spectacular image of the city, one that is conspicuous, surfacing in many artistic and communicative projects, it is not the electronic or the cybernetic that provides the main gravitation centres for the city and its meaning. Metropolises have many gravitation centres and many ways of thickening the space-time continuum (since the city is not reducible to mere space). The centres of real importance are however placed in the proximity of the local experience.

The metropolitan is about the politics of recognizing not just the unity but, first and foremost, the independence of its constituent solids, figures and points. It is out of the spirit of independence of that strange geometry that the metropolis arises. The metropolis is never a physical or spiritual monolith. To examine the metropolitan geometry of space is in fact to come up against a multitude of geometries. And even if the focus is on the nonlinearity or linearity of the metropolis, on its spacious or superficial character, on its attachment to certain solids or figures, what cannot be left out is the significance of the points in the space-time continuum which correspond to individual experiences of the inhabitants faced by the fate and cultural force of the territory. It is on them that the metropolis truly relies.

The metropolis is a continuation and reinforcement of urban settlement in its major sense that Richard Sennet was writing about – of providing the space for the encounters between strangers.¹² The metropolitan dwells on the interpersonal distance and implies the trust in idiosyncrasy. It aims at loosening ties and basing social games on the rules of politeness and indifference. It does not mean, though, that it is a mere social product since strong metropolises do exhibit the power of a separate cultural territory. This kind of local distinctiveness

¹² Richard Sennet: *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*, New York 1978, p. 39.

is what cannot and should not be disregarded.

The metropolis has to extend over some large space as its surface is its main force. It is a real and tangible power within territorial bounds. One cannot dismiss this territorial power from one's interpretation since without the sense of being rooted or settled in and on the ground, without the expansiveness, there will not be any expansive thinking or nonchalance of action typical of the metropolis. To govern such a vast territory is to highlight the differences of its constituent areas and, most importantly, to blur the boundaries and to acknowledge the detail, the ornament, and the stigma of different and unfamiliar experience. The broadness of thinking elevates the position of the fragile points of experience and individual relationship with the metropolis. In short, the metropolis is what acknowledges and upgrades local routes.

The metropolis is a social project and even more – it is a cultural project that consists in learning how to deal with differences. At the gates of the postmodern metropolises, gates that have already become blurred, transparent, allowing migration into the city space, there is always a gathering of strangers. The tension detectable in the relationship between hosts and strangers is examined by Michael Alexander.¹³ One could draw the conclusion that the metropolis is a peculiar notion that relies on the presence of strangers both at its gates and inside. There is a necessary clash between the metropolitan policy of openness, also in liberal and aesthetic terms, and its practices of exclusion and assimilation. As Ewa Rewers rightly points out, the metropolis may aspire to become something more than just a cosmopolitan agglomerate – it may become “urban culture transcending constitutive differences.”¹⁴ It can however also work to make the differences inessential and supplant them by the ceremonial celebrating of irrelevant divergences in the public space. But I am interested in still another element of the metropolitan life – ethnicization of space that reinforces the differences of one's own and those of newcomers. This corresponds to what Ewa Rewers calls the “re-ethnicization of European culture,” where “both newcomers and hosts withdraw into the familiar.”¹⁵ In the humanities it is perceived as

¹³ Michel Alexander: *Host-Strangers Relation in Theory and Practice*, in: Michel Alexander, *Cities and Labour Immigration: Comparing Policy Responses in Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, and Tel Aviv (Research in Migration and Ethnic Relations)*, Hampshire 2007, pp. 25–36.

¹⁴ Ewa Rewers: *Miasto – twórczość...*, p. 29.

¹⁵ Ewa Rewers: *Miasto – twórczość...*, p. 37.

a threat in the context of the dominating myth of rootlessness that is cultivated by authors who fear the comeback of nation-states. The idea of a nation-state is associated with the suppression of autonomous communities and local dialects, a vision ominously sketched by Zygmunt Bauman.¹⁶ But it is a gross overstatement to link rootedness and ethnicization with the idea of a monolithic nation. One should not frame the problem by confronting it with the threat of the renaissance of nationalism. It is not so much about the nation as about locality. It translates into the hope for recovering the ethnic and, in this sense, genuine nature of the place, which can be a good, homely and communal space unless it becomes the territory of cultural dictatorship. It is much more advisable to trust the attachment to the cultural difference of a place than J. Nicholas Entrikin's idea of cosmopolitanism, which is reducible to the educational project of transcending one's own position in favour of something in fact little known and understood.¹⁷ Rewers has struggled with the question of what is conducive to the creation of a cosmopolitan place, whether it is hybridization and transgression, or mixing, or rather erasure of borders and introduction of transnational standards.¹⁸ This is a crucial problem. In my view, from the perspective of the place and locality, the desired opening of borders can only be brought about by a strong place, that is, a place with roots, one that has a distinct position on the map of surrounding local communities, yet one that is also hospitable, allowing the changing cultures of newcomers to be heard and seen. Otherness is highlighted by the local culture on condition that the culture of others actively engages in its being brought to light.

This is how I perceive the problem of locality and the metropolis. A local metropolis is a space which brings to light the locality of a community which is stronger than any headline-making social events or conspicuous civilizational changes. Locality is present in the experiences of individuals who realize their potential within a community and do it with a sense of being rooted in the place. Barcelona would be a perfect example of such a good local community brought

¹⁶ Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2000.

¹⁷ J. Nicholas Entrikin: *Political Community, Identity, and Cosmopolitan Place*, in: *Europe without Borders. Remapping Territory, Citizenship, and Identity in a Transnational Age*, Mabel Berezin, Martin Schain (eds.), Baltimore, London 2003.

¹⁸ Ewa Rewers: *Miasto – twórczość...*, p. 42.

to light by Catalonia. Without strong regionalism there would be no home because it is only at home that the metropolis is able to exhibit its rootedness. One should give up the notion of the chief significance of rootlessness and the social project of tolerance based on the hotch-potch of different views and ways of living. It is true that they come to light within the metropolis on account of the vastness of its thinking and openness of its hospitable space. They are nevertheless not primary. Home is built by means of the power of the territory and the passion of thinking about the local position of a human being, however bombastic it may sound. This local orientation of a human does not lead to the closing of local worlds, but it does bring about the common creation of the space of certainties, which involves not only the unquestioned pride in one's identity, but also the imperative to extend it in all directions: towards the infinite, toward the other, the impossible, the incomprehensible and the strange. Locality is then what introduces the city to the neighbouring areas that contribute to its making. It would be an overstatement, though, to say that locality leads the city out of and away from itself. Being at home is never a lost chance. A local metropolis does not close the door on strangers, nor does it try to overcome difference: instead, it endeavours to reinforce it and demonstrate the strength of the place. It imposes on its inhabitants a sense of being subjects of the place that transcends them. To respect others is to accept the fact that whatever is mine is strong but the difference of strangers is equally strong and well founded. If we respect difference, we no longer debate about bland and wishy-washy ideas such as equality because a place is always defined, it is "mine." And what is mine is unified by the imperative of hospitality, but also by the need to protect oneself and one's own image of what constitutes a human being, community and territory. In this sense, locality of the metropolis would be an alternative to the notion of the metropolis as a big social shopping mall. To local territories difference is something essential that cannot be made irrelevant by the demands of political correctness.

I would be most glad to be able to share Rewers's view that the immigrants are the "avant-garde and laboratory of the post-nation state."¹⁹ I can see the point – they can indeed be an animating factor that impedes the growth of the sense of homeliness, in the sense of being at home which is my castle, securely locked

¹⁹ Ewa Rewers: *Miasto – twórczość*., p. 46.

against strangers. But I do not think that they are a real driving force because the proper subject of culture is a place. It is what reverberates in thinking, in the receptivity to others, in the treatment of time, necessity and fate, and in the approach to nature. The newcomers complete the existing project of a place inasmuch as they become its subjects – in the good sense of subjection as service and humility, as conscious being in a place that means being adequately situated. It is utterly wrong when they question the rules of a community and threaten to erase the uniqueness of the place.

It is true that we are in need of a language of communal rights that would secure one's membership of a community such as EU, but it need not be construed as a project aimed at erasing local difference. Whenever I think about the Habermasian notion of "European constitutional patriotism"²⁰, I know that for Europe it is a mere ethnographic invention – the idea of combining societies in the name of a broader community unified by its attachment to Enlightenment emancipation projects. Transnational social movements and the defense of human rights are a cultural advantage, a mere particular gesture that becomes both the object of desire for the others without and the reason for their aggression. Universalism of the European perspective is a local value that may be tempting to others while having pride of the place in the community. The most sensible attitude is to hold on to one's space, which remains open to whatever comes but at the same time is able to guard its distinctiveness in terms of the repertoire of local values and mental habits. This is a guarantee of the particularity of the place, of the sense that where we live is not a mere construction of the discourses of administration and law.

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²⁰ Jürgen Habermas: "Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe," *Praxis International*, 1992, no. 12.