My Dear Francis...What Kind of Phoenix will Arise from These Ashes?

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MY DEAR FRANCIS... WHAT KIND OF PHOENIX WILL ARISE FROM THESE ASHES?
BY NIKOLAS PATSOPOULOS

Don’t look at the mud in my feet with disgrace, it only means I am escaping. Don’t look at my ragged clothes, they are only sign I am free.¹

The recent developments in Tahrir Square in Egypt and the Indignados in Spain followed by the London riots and the Syntagma Square uprising in Athens have forced me to revisit this quote. Albeit it is not mud anymore, in this fully “developed” corner of the world, but yellowish tear gas dust, just as the holes in the clothes have converted to rips from excessive police violence. Someone might ask, why is it any different now? Protests and demonstrations have been occurring non-stop, well after the “end of history” had been declared in the beginning of the 90’s. Many of them are even more violent and oppressive than the ones I listed.

The answer is that, up to this day, there has always been a counterbalance to this game of power. A safety limit existed setting the rules and the extent of what was allowed and what was considered excessive. At the very beginning, there were the neighboring city-states and countries. After that, following the concurrent advancement of trade, the task of balancing fell onto the shoulders of other continents or even newly discovered faraway lands. Then it was time for the political opponent, the Soviet Union, to play this role. Eric Hobsbawm has all too well explained all that.

Nowadays the crisis has reached a new singularity. It is cannibalizing itself. This is the strategic difference that we can feel today. We don’t have to be very close followers of David Harvey’s work to realize that the system in which we are living is closing in on its limits. Human rights are being nullified in a heartbeat and market shares are the tune to which countries dance, indifferent to the repercussions on their citizens.

¹ Jamaican saying from the slave trade era.
Even though freedom can run against itself, lines of flight will still open up in this ambivalence; Suffering can be productive, but it can never be revolutionary; Only excess, overflow and power can be revolutionary.\footnote{2}

The de-socialization of the analog life brought us remote relationships through digital social networking. This remoteness enhanced the dissolution between the social strata and the political function of the system. Shortly after the beginning of the 21st century, the economic market discovered a new fueling system, debt. In essence, market economy became debt economy of debt. Debtocracy became a distorted version of democracy. We live in the aftermath of this economy.

We have to fight for the right to invent the terms which will allow us to define ourselves and our relations to society. We have to fight for these terms to get accepted. This is the first right of a free person, and also the first right that an oppressor will refuse.\footnote{3}

It has been left to us to decide if we will try to understand and smooth out the bumpy ride of dissolution or fight for its complete overtaking. Crises are a crucial ingredient in the capitalist recipe. Previous systemic crises on the “long 19th century” and “short 20th century” were different from globalised version of our world. Nations and populations have to find solutions on a local and a global scale simultaneously. This essay focuses on another aspect of the current crisis: the complete lack of obvious solutions.

In this era of multiplicities and conjoining disciplines, politics has long lagged behind and maybe it will be timely for it to finally catch up. It is generally accepted that time is and will always be of the essence in these matters, but the same time that is quickly running out, can now acquire attributes of historical importance.

We can safely assume by now, that we can recognize most of our ghosts and that we do want to discard our self proclaimed heroes. We really can be the ones we have been waiting for, as Slavoj Žižek has argued. Single or multi-headed directive monsters face in terror the solitude of abandonment. The left has lived with these symptoms for at least 30 years and it yet has not produced a defined solution. So might I safely assume that since there is no solution, there is no problem?


Despite disparate aims and personnel of its constituent members, the underground is agreed on basic objectives. We intend to march on the police machine everywhere. We intend to destroy the police machine and all its records. We intend to destroy all dogmatic verbal systems. The family unit and its cancerous expansion into tribes, countries, nations, we will eradicate at its vegetable roots. We don’t want to hear any more family talk, mother talk, father talk, cop talk, priest talk, country talk or party talk. To put it country simple, we have heard enough bullshit. […] Rotation and exchange is a keystone of the underground. I am bringing them modern weapons: laser guns, infrasound installations, Deadly Orgone Radiation. […] We will be ready to strike in their cities and to resist in the territories we now hold. Meanwhile we watch and train and wait.

I have a thousand faces and a thousand names. I am nobody I am everybody. I am me I am you. I am here there forward back in out. I stay everywhere I stay nowhere. I stay present I stay absent.4

Where does architecture fit in all this? As Bernard Tschumi once stated, architecture can never be self referential. It has to mirror what is going on around it. As an example of this situation one can easily refer to the early 20’s in the still forming Soviet Union and its social experimenting. The groups of ASNOVA, OSA and the rest of their constituents set off for a magic journey that had a completely unpredictable outcome. They did not know what they wanted, they only knew what they were moving away from, as Moisei Ginsburg stated with utter confidence in his response-letter to Le Corbusier:

History confronts us with problems that can only have a revolutionary solution [paraphrasing Marx] and, however feeble our resources, we will solve them no matter what. […] We are making a diagnosis of the modern city. We say: yes, it is sick, mortally sick. But we do not want to cure it. We prefer to destroy it and intend to begin work on a new form of human settlement that will be free of internal contradictions and might be called socialist. […] And all this will be possible not by smoothing out the contradictions with which the modern capitalist system is riddled, but by creating new forms of human settlement more worthy of the future. […] We are aware that we have yet to find the solution to this very difficult problem. But we cannot refrain from posing it, we cannot refrain from trying to solve it. That is our duty, the duty of architects who would like to become the architects of socialism.5

In that exact historic time and space, architecture came face to face with problems that were not even conceived until then. The profit margin dissipated, leaving room for clear thoughts and liberated dialectic among the lucky participants. A handfull of them broke off

4 William S. Burroughs, My Mother and I Would Like to Know, Evergreen Review Reader #67, June 1969
5 Letter from Moisei Ginsburg in Sovremennaia Arkhitektura, 1930.
even further away and started calling for a completely different form of human settlement. Two of them paid with their lives… Can we really imagine an architect today standing firm between his spatial and political ideas and the threat of losing his life?

Nobody can really presuppose how the architectural world will deal with the current situation. Some might have thought that the greening of everything possible could be the next best thing, a trend even, for the profession and the academia. Still, environmental consciousness is only one of the things that we will have think about. In reality, the situations that we might be called to face in the near future might be as a grave as they can get. A whole structure set up on profit margins and carrier expectations will most probably come crumbling down. What will remain of it is a metaphysical mystery of sorts…

What constitutes Mendeleev’s great achievement is that he was the first one to have the courage to leave gaps in the table instead of trying to enforce artificial closure to it…

The above comment by Manuel De Landa might be the finalizing point of this text. In short, sometimes not having the answer can be equally good and creative. The most important thing is to recognize the situation and allow for the timely gap-filing whenever possible.

The reason why this essay deliberately avoids coming into certain conclusions is exactly the very essence of it. Every reader is called to reach his own conclusions and thoughts out of the posed problems and opportunities. We have learned to live with multiplicities and gaps. Our newly defined digital world showed us the way to make the best out of it. It is high time to let go and maybe understand that although we have managed to reach a very high technical level as a civilization, not all can be mastered by us.

As an answer to Jean Baudrillard’s question, not only nobody knows the kind of phoenix but in all probability nobody wants or can know either.

The real issue is what this kind certainly is not going to be…

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