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Papers - 2

URBAN REFORM IN THE 90s?

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INTRODUCTION

During the Global Forum held in Rio de Janeiro at the same time as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, there was held an International Forum on Urban Reform, sponsored by the Foro Brasileiro da Reforma Urbana, represented by three non-governmental organizations (NGOs): FASE/RJ (Federacao de Orgaos para Assistencia Social e Educacional/Rio de Janeiro), POLIS and ANSUR (Asociacao Nacional do Solo Urbano), Habitat International Coalition (HIC) and Frente Continental de Organizaciones Comunes (FCOC). One of its aims was to arrive at a "treaty" on the urban question. For that purpose, there had been distributed ahead of time a document elaborated on the basis of a Brazilian text which, after being discussed with other NGOs of Latin America as well as other continents, had presumably been divested of what applied specifically to the Brazilian situation. It was then presented as a document that purported to reflect the state of the urban question and proposals for dealing with it, at the international level.

The paper which follows was a reaction to that document which was justified by the discussions that took place during the event. The paper has been expanded with a view to contributing to the dialogue among Latin Americans and with other regions of the world, but especially with our Brazilian partners, which means pointing out both our diversity and our unity, in an effort to seek bases for effective action toward common goals.

Our view was as follows: the urban reform proposal presented had not been properly stripped of its Brazilian specificity, because the very fact of formulating it presupposed a particular reality and state of theory that were not the same as those that predominated in other regions of the continent and possibly even much less so with respect to regions such as Africa, where the history of the relationship between State and society is quite different.

If this is the case, we must use this situation as a relevant example of the need we Latin Americans have to recognize each other and to recognize other regions of the world in this time of true globalism. This does not mean that, in its confrontation with the neoliberal design to globalize human society, the progressist

elements must instead focus on heterogeneity and confine themselves within the particular, denying any possibility of general theories or common actions even on a planetary scale.² On the contrary, it assumes that such a level of globalization is desirable, but that, if it is to be achieved on a firm foundation, it must be built on the recognition and understanding of the ways in which we differ.

To begin with, we believe that our Brazilian partners were putting forward a proposal that was once generally shared by the progressive forces of Latin America but by many has today either been simply forgotten or denied three times on the altar of opportunism or defeatism. However, our Latin America, which continues to be capitalist, is so in a different way. The mechanisms of domination are changing: the cultural aspect is acquiring greater autonomy and relative weight with respect to the economic aspect. The legitimate and effective forms of political action are being reconsidered: the relationship between politics and management, between politics and economy, must be reassessed. The relationship between State and society is changing both quantitatively and qualitatively: the State is diminishing, especially in terms of its social functions and its ability to regulate the capitalist market. And all this ought to have consequences for our approaches and their theoretical foundation – consequences which, to our mind, do not appear in the proposal made.

It seems to us that the explanation of this may lie in the prolonged military dictatorship and Brazil's particular, rich experience of political and social struggle that achieved the return to a democratic system – a struggle that passed through the retraction of the popular sectors of society in the face of the dictatorial State, the development of community forms of material and cultural survival, the development of numerous new social movements, and a connectedness with political life dramatically represented by that epic achievement: *la Constituyente*. This was also manifested in new theoretical and practical approaches that have now become part of universal wisdom, such as the specific reinterpretation of needs in terms of rights and the weight given to the participatory generation of legal precepts.

² Here we agree with the criticism made by Jordi Borja regarding a slogan that was circulating at the Global Forum: "Think globally, act locally".

Added to this is the fact that in Brazil the progressive forces have managed to accede by way of elections to highly significant positions of State power, broadening their experience and achieving an efficacy that makes them a power option, capable of governing the country.³

An additional hypothesis on another level would be that in Brazil, colonialism and capitalism destroyed family and community integration forms far more effectively, producing an isolated individual who, in a situation of crisis, does not have the recourse of turning to strategies of solidarity and reciprocity that those levels permit, with the result that the State appears as the principal recourse for socially surmounting the crisis.⁴

All this can help to explain the State-oriented character of the proposal as well as the politico-juridical emphasis that one notes in the proposed reform approach. We feel that a fraternal dialogue on this proposal is important, both because the Brazilian initiative opens up a highly relevant avenue for taking up afresh and making some progress on matters that had been unnecessarily banished, and because Latin American collective thinking might be useful for a Brazil that is perhaps too closed in on itself or, as some say, "facing the Atlantic and turning its back to the rest of Latin America". It may also be useful in order to make it easier to step back for a moment from the political practices of the times, allowing new theoretical hypotheses to develop so as to take account of a reality that is changing at a dizzying pace and provide food for much needed strategic thought.

³ We do not mean to say that this occurs only in Brazil. To mention a few cases, the Frente Amplio in Uruguay finds itself in a similar situation; the PRD in Mexico has had unique experience (which has also been very rich in urban struggles) and offers equally strong hopes in view of the weight of that country in Latin America; the Izquierda Unida in Peru has an important history of organizing social movements and politics, including its recent government in Lima; the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) in Central America, and M-19 in Colombia, with a varied history of struggle, are power options in the coming elections, and do in fact share in the power of the State, just as in Chile the history of the Resistance resulted in the present coalition government of progressive political forces.

⁴ Hypothesis suggested by a conversation with Silvio Caccia Bava, Director of POLIS.

Taking part in such a dialogue involves risks, such as the possibility of being disqualified by a specific datum or by a higher understanding whose legitimacy stems from one's being an active member of the other culture in question. As yet, as we heard Paulo Freire say at another Forum meeting, "without risks, life has no meaning".

1. The content of urban reform

Urban reform ordinarily proceeds from a criticism of "the actual city", which in Latin America is tantamount to saying: "the city resulting from complex processes of urbanization in societies whose transition to the ideal model of capitalism was never completed". That criticism illuminates our descriptions and explanations of urban reality and its trends and is based on theories guided alternative-city utopias.

At times, such utopias are set up directly (a city designed in accordance with an optimal layout of urban sites and movements), but generally they are built by projecting, for a given territory, a utopian society (democratic, egalitarian, classless, answering to a social rationality represented by the conscious planning of the territory).⁵

Consequently, any proposal to reform the city implies a macrosocial transformation process which, in view of the integrated juridico-institutional character of our countries, cannot be local, but must take in all the cities of a country. In fact, one might say that, given the relatively integrated juridico-institutional character of the capitalist world, a lasting urban reform must be conceived today at the global level. Hence the possible relevance of the proposal's being formulated in a global forum.

The content of urban reform can be theorized at three levels: the meaning of the city, the basic structural mechanisms for producing it and the methods of achieving the institutionalization of both (meaning and structural mechanisms).

⁵ On this, one may see José Luis Coraggio, "Consideraciones sobre la planificación urbana posible en los 90", Fernando Carrión, coord., Ciudades y Políticas Urbanas (Quito, CODEL, 1992).

1.1. The meaning of the city

The critique of capitalism has characterized the meaning of cities as being a place built or refunctionalized for the collective management and accumulation of private capital.⁶ Urban reform proposes a change in that meaning, making the city a place for the enhance reproduction of the life of all.

This postulation of meaning implies that, prior to any definition of urban policies, one must assume:

- A) A concept of development other than capitalist development, and**
- B) Special consideration for certain equilibria (biological, social) that would render such development sustainable.**

A. Regarding the CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT, there are two main possibilities:

A.1. In the first place, a concept of development **centred on social accumulation** viewed as a necessary condition (development of productive forces) for the full satisfaction of needs, guided by planning, both direct (of State resources) and induced (of non-State agents).

In this case, accelerated accumulation tends to be transformed –for ideologic reasons or due to the action of forces of a supranational order- into a *leitmotiv* that imparts its dynamic to the development process.

Within this framework, urban planning has a corrective function with respect to the extreme social effects of accumulation and is focused on:

⁶ There are variants to this. Some have emphasized the role played by the city (and the collective consumption managed by the State) in the reproduction of the labor force; others, the role that it fulfils in the creation of the general (shared) conditions of production. See the classic works: Manuel Castells, La cuestión urbana (Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI Editores, 1974); Jean Lojkine, El Marxismo, el Estado y la cuestión urbana (México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1979).

- (i) Centralized control of access to urban land and its uses (considered a reproducible differentiated asset, a possible source of rents);
- (ii) The spatial organization of activities in accordance with the rationality derived from development objectives;
- (iii) Universal access to housing in the narrow sense and to what are referred to as “urban services”,⁷ or what is known as “habitat”.

Within this scheme, the distribution of “urban” goods and services tends to be conceived on the basis of a centralized definition of what is required as a basic standard for the reproduction of life –established either scientifically, as the minima required according to scientifico-technical considerations, or empirically (statistically).⁸ These standards act as restrictions on the maximization of accumulation. The relationship between accumulation and satisfaction of basic needs appears to be a quantitative relationship in a homogeneous space, represented by the well-know trade-off: the greater the accumulation, the lesser the satisfaction of needs in the short term and, possibly, the greater the satisfaction in the long term.

Within this perspective there then arises, as a recurrent problem, the contradiction between accumulation and consumption, and also between market and plan, and a definite redistributive trend prevails (access to land and services independently of ability to pay, differential service rates to compensate for other economic inequalities, State housing and infrastructure programmers for popular sectors, etc.). To this is added the use of tax and price policies and a proliferation of direct regulation in order to achieve a spatial organization in accord with the criteria of social efficiency.

⁷ The question of when a service is considered an “urban service” (water, sanitation, energy, transportation, health, education, etc.) has never been clearly settled. Combined here are aspects of the spatiality proper of such services, attractive to a physical planner (their network organization and their affinity with models of central areas and locations), and the empirical fact that the capitalist State has tended to assume responsibility for them or to regulate their management.

⁸ Generally, neither the complicated relationship between social and political structures, culture, technology and basic natural conditions nor the historical character of that relationship has been clear in the formulation of these basic requirements; consequently, their alleged scientific character would have to be qualified.

This imparts to urban policy (and to the process of urban reform) a directly political character when one seeks to set an autonomous State power against the free play of forces on the market and the power of capital manifested there, viewed as both a reflection and a source of inequalities and inefficiency.

Within this alternative there are two further sub-variants:

- a) Domestically centred development, and
- b) Development open to international competition.

The former tends to impose greater restrictions on consumption, inasmuch as the resources for accumulation derive primarily from domestic savings. The second would entail the loss of the ability to control centrally both the rate of growth and the definition of basic needs, which would be subject to the play of international forces.

In either case, however, certain macroeconomic equilibria, relationships and standards tend to impose themselves as “natural” conditions of any economy and to remain, therefore, outside of the will of the citizenry.

A. 2. In the second place, a concept of development focused on the satisfaction of the basic need of all, in which the development dynamic is provided by the ever expandable character of the definition of basic needs.⁹ In this case, accumulation is a subordinate condition of development. Urban planning, in turn, tends to take the form of the management of the immediate *habitat* of the various human settlements, and is centred on the conscious, democratic building of that habitat.

⁹ The progressive character of basic needs, which is not always taken into account, is fundamental in order for this model to be legitimately upheld. Too rigid a definition of basic needs might prove unable to maintain, economically, the political legitimacy of a government or regime in the long term, even if, as in the case of Cuba, levels of satisfaction of those needs were achieved that were unprecedented in peripheral capitalist countries. This does not imply the illegitimacy of such a regime; it implies that a special job of legitimation must be undertaken, given the inability of the economy alone to achieve it.

The concept of need as right and the concept of satisfactory are rendered complex by the consideration of synergic effects, one of the consequences of which is that direct participation of the citizens in local decision-making and urban-management processes is presented as a necessity, at the same time that it is a social resources.¹⁰

An empirical, but not logically necessary, problem with this approach is that it has tended to overlook macroeconomic and macropolitical processes, focusing on microsocial processes and local agents, viewed as producers of their immediate conditions of production and reproduction.¹¹

We believe that proposals for urban reform have tended to emphasize the former concept of development, albeit introducing into the discussion terms and a few isolated theses from the second. Yet the choice between a model centred on accumulation and one centred on the enhanced reproduction of life is not merely one of quantity or of emphasis: what is involved is two modes of life, two models of civilization.

B. The SUSTAINABLE CHARACTER OF DEVELOPMENT is intimately related to the preceding discussion.

The concept of development focused on social accumulation has a greater tendency to disregard ecological equilibria as well as social (satisfactory levels of consumption for the entire population, distribution of political power, etc.) and mental equilibria.

On the other hand, a concept of development focused on local actors loses the possibility of conceptualizing and acting on the supra local processes that give rise to those imbalances

¹⁰ On this one may see Manfred Max-Neef et al., "Human Scale Development: An Option for the Future", Development Dialogue, 1989.

¹¹ Our position is that it is not a question of opting for one of these approaches, nor of merely juxtaposing them. Grass-roots-based management must be integrated into a vision of the whole, which presupposes agents not motivated exclusively by their own personal interest. A proposal for State management must consider that the motivation of the majority cannot be replaced by central planning. Direct democracy must be integrated with representative democracy. Social initiatives must be articulated with other, State, initiatives.

(ecosystems, national or world markets, interregional imbalances, etc.).¹²

Consequently, the relationship between sustainable development and urban reform has yet to be built, and it is possible that the connections made in the immediate future will be mere superficial juxtapositions, since at the time what is needed is to revise the very concepts of urban reform and development rather than to put them together.

1.2. The fundamental mechanism of production of the city

For capitalism, this mechanism was characterized as the combination of the market, dominated by monopolistic corporations guided by profit, and a capitalist State that assumed social functions, also derived from the needs of capital accumulation in general. The specific ways in which the market and the State operated in peripheral societies were well known,¹³ but the most abstract theoretical conceptions regarding urban questions continued to be grounded in the ideal model of fully developed capitalism.

What urban reform traditionally proposed as an alternative was the institutionalization of a political mechanism to define State policies, aimed at the well-being of the majority and the social regulation of private capital.

Today, amid the wave of anti-statism that is sweeping the world, the character –involving greater or lesser State or grass-roots control, greater or lesser centralization or participation- of an alternative to the market mechanism is a central topic that ought to be taken up in any general proposal for urban reform.

This means discussing questions such as:

¹² This question is developed further in “La propuesta de descentralización: en busca de un sentido popular”, in José Luis Coraggio, Ciudades sin rumbo, (Quito, CIUDAD-SIAP, 1991).

¹³ See, for example, Tilman Evers, El estado en la periferia capitalista (México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1979), and Alain Touraine, Las sociedades dependientes. Ensayos sobre América Latina (México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1978).

- (i) The different forms and contents of participation, and the impact on them when a grass-roots party holds State positions;
- (ii) The possibility of a market which, while connected to the capitalist market, does not generate capitalistic relationships;¹⁴
- (iii) The possibility of generalizing other (non-mercantile) forms of socialization of labor (social service, campaigns on health, education, infrastructure building, etc.).

1.3. Institutionalization processes

The urban reform tradition in Latin America gave rise to a number of positions. There were those who simply advocated reform as a model of higher social rationality, appealing to the good sense of politicians and international organizations to take up the proposal. Others assumed that only after a political revolution would it be possible to implement an urban reform, and they therefore produced arguments basically critical of capitalism, without focusing on any immediately viable proposals. Still others concentrated on the question of political transition, considering urban reform a springboard for struggle and negotiation within the chinks in the political system, in particular urban planning.

Far from being a class proposal or the proposal of a new universal rationality, urban reform should be viewed as a typical case of transition, since the network of interests affected by it is extensive and diverse, with contradictions existing not only between the dominant and subordinate classes, but even right with the popular camp (as in the obvious case of tenants and owners of modest dwellings, or between inhabitants of different quarters, or between inhabitants and non-resident business, etc.).

Moreover, the structural changes required for its implementation affect the scope of institutions such as private property, which are not limited to the urban area (for this reason, too, urban reform and agrarian reform are intimately related).

¹⁴ Work on this question is being carried out by Luis Razetto. See his Economía de solidaridad y Mercado democrático (three volumes) (Santiago, Academia de Humanismo Cristiano, 1988).

If to this we add the current situation characterized by a dramatic redefinition of the balances of power, both internationally and nationally, with a generally negative impact as far as popular projects are concerned, it seems elementary that a proposal based on urban reform should be formulated in terms of a prolonged process of transformation, the possible sequence and timing of which depend on conditions usually absent from the presentation of the proposal by the city planners. Indeed, processes involving the establishment of new relationships and institutions that support themselves in their day-to-day practice and do not require constant support by the State have been generally absent from idealistic urban reform proposals.

As a result, much of the thinking on urban reform has been situated in the realm of utopia, at the very same time that, in a confused way, the proposal was presented as a list of immediately possible actions. It was apparently assumed, with this type of proposal, that the question of State power had been resolved revolutionarily and that (an age-old error) once the power was attained, there would be all the time in the world to correct mistakes and transform society at will.

To take up the urban question again today implies accepting the requirement to make concrete proposals, not only as a way to legitimize the criticism of the system, but also as a methodology for building a political will of the majority.

2. How urban reform proposals are presented

Urban reform proposals tend to be presented technocratically: as a list stating the objectives that the State should establish, the (equitable) rules of production and distribution of the means of reproduction and the juridico-institutional forms in which such public policies are to be imposed.

This method presents a number of problems: even if they are ideologically framed within the context of a proposed new meaning, the policies are not accompanied by any analysis (even a general one) of the conditions of their feasibility and, consequently, by the

procedures and time requirements for creating that feasibility. Such conditions are basically technological, economic, cultural and political. Without any explicit statement of those conditions and the procedures proposed for achieving them, obtaining lasting legitimacy for urban reform proposals and actions becomes especially difficult.

The need for an adequate political analysis

Missing, in other words, between the proposal of a new direction and the list of “concrete proposals”, are the mediations that would make them truly concrete, in the sense that a series of procedures for achieving their long-term viability and lastingness had been identified as objectively as possible. Should this step be left out, the proposal might easily be brushed aside as idealistic (its effectiveness would depend on the will of the State, changing with the different governments; it does not clearly mention the opposed forces that the attempt to implement it would unleash, or the margins of compromise necessary for a sufficient social alliance to support it) or else might give rise to false hopes regarding its effective realization, apparently depending merely on changing the political powers and technicians that occupy the State machinery.¹⁵

In particular, it must be established what type of transformation of society and of the economy ought, it is assumed, to take shape in and for the new city in question. For indeed, an urban reform such as that proposed at the Global Forum must be set within a process of profound social change.¹⁶

Similarly, political conditions that will make it possible for the State to adopt such new policies legitimately must be established; such conditions cannot amount simply to the occupation of positions in the local (or even national) government by any means whatsoever.

¹⁵ The question that is missing is that of the politico-social transition. Some discussion of this point can be found in José L. Coraggio and Carmen D. Deere (coordinators), La transición difícil. La autodeterminación de los pequeños países periféricos (México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1986).

¹⁶ For example, those implied by “...the law granting the real right of use and possession of the land, the reform of the tax system, building construction, among others.” (In “Nossas propostas para o meio ambiente nas cidades”).

This does not mean a mere claim of completeness and thorough public explanation of the strategic arguments behind the urban reform, which in itself would be a requirement for democratic political practice, but implies that:

- (a) A distinction must be made between a project for society and a proposal, whether for struggle or negotiation, based on the interests of certain sectors (however broad they may be);
- (b) Proposals must be politically responsible, in that they must differentiate between utopia and real possibilities¹⁷;
- (c) Actions aimed at bringing about a utopia can be counterproductive with regard to the direction or meaning ascribed to the urban reform.

In other words, a proposal that did not meet these formal conditions would not manage to go beyond being a theoretical expression of the overall meaning already formulated as a starting point, but would simply be an analytical explanation of it, or else a mere tautology (as, for example, when one says that one aspires to equality and proposes a more equitable distribution of urban services).

In the absence of such considerations, any possibility that might exist for effectively starting to implement an urban reform may run up against an adverse reality that had not been taken into account (unavailable technology, limitation of resources, opposed forces guided by contrary interests, lack of public enthusiasm for a long-term project, cultural resistance, etc.), leading to excessive improvisation, which is risky.

Furthermore, such a proposal would not in itself inspire the confidence that the process of constituting social and political forces capable of realizing it requires, nor would it be a sufficient guide for political action.

The need for an appropriate social theory

¹⁷ This does not mean that the relationship between utopia and reality should consist in the masking of the latter by the former. On the contrary, without any utopia there is no way to delimit a scientific field of social research.

It might be said that what effectively guides action is not an analytical, empirically optimized list of objectives, goals and instruments of public policy clearly setting forth the procedures for their implementation, but rather the theoretical framework within which the proposal is set.

Even if we accept this viewpoint, it is necessary to explain and re-examine that framework and its uses. Radical conceptions of urban reform have fundamentally involved a Marxist view of the capitalist mode of production, seen as the extreme situation in a capitalism that had turned not only products and services but also nature and the whole of human relations into commodities, and had done so, into the bargain, in a modality in which the industrial fractions of capital ruled. It is toward the negation of that mode of production that proposals would presumably be directed.¹⁸

More than that, however, what appears to be involved is a certain reading of what can be culled from the writings of Marx in the way of thoughts on the reality of our societies, a reading characterized by an economistic theory of culture, the State and politics, and the absence of any theory of social formations in which various modes of production are linked together. Added to this is a concept of politics and social change according to which the State, within a scheme in which the market is pitted against State planning, is a privileged center for the regulation and transformation off society.

We believe that these features have in the past limited the potential for the effective orientation of policy by Marxism and that they should be re-examined in every area, including the urban area.

The need to transcend the disciplinary character of the proposal

A rigorous historical empirical study of economic relationships and their spatiality would show that, just as the city is inseparable from its regional setting, urban reform and agrarian reform must go hand in hand.

¹⁸ This perspective appears to have been present in the considerations leading up to the proposal formulated.

The recent incorporation of considerations relating to sustainable development deepen this conception, which goes against the urban/rural dichotomy, thus constituting yet another case of unjustified importation of theories conceived for highly industrialized countries.

Another problem stems from the excessive academic-vocational division of labor among disciplines: city planning has come up with urban design proposals compatible with a different social rationality and has succeeded in tying the spatial to the social, yet the view persists that it has an epistemological object of its own that also merits specific policies.¹⁹

Thus, if we should ask ourselves today what are the most pressing problems faced by the majority sectors in their daily life and what is the possibility of their being solved with public policies, we might possibly discover that the development of a popular economy strategically and logically comes before advancing toward a superior design of the city,²⁰ or that, at best, urban reform must be subsidiary to the process of generating the foundations of sustainable development with a popular content.

This implies that urban reform is not in itself a *question*, but rather a proposal for action to deal with the urban question; that the latter, in turn, is a social question which is subordinate to the question of the development of new economic relationships as the material foundation of our societies; that, in consequence, mechanisms of cooperation oriented either by solidarity values or by the market may play a far more relevant part than the implicit emphasis on the virtues of State control would lead one to believe.

¹⁹ On this, see José Luis Coraggio, "Pautas para una discusión sobre el futuro de la investigación en América Latina", *Sociología*, vol.7, N° 18 (México, January-April 1992). See also the four volumes published by CIUDAD: La investigación urbana en América Latina. Caminos recorridos y por recorrer (Quito, CIUDAD, 1990-1991).

²⁰ It is possible that underlying many urban reform proposals was the aspiration to achieve fully what the anarchy of the capitalist market did not permit: maximum development of productive forces, which was also equated to maximum possible capital, accumulation, given the restriction of satisfying the minimum needs of the population. If, however, we start from the development of a popular economy as the key to possible development in our countries, many of assumptions contained in those proposals must be profoundly revised.

3. The terms of the urban question in the 90s

When the “urban question” came to exist as a question in its own right within the context of the social issues of our countries, the social integration paradigm was in vogue. The aspect of inequality that capitalism might impart to that integration in our peripheral societies was criticized, but in any event alternative proposals were aimed at affirming and improving this objective of social integration, grounded in the economic base of the society.

Consequently, the market was seen as a capitalistic mechanism of integration-proletarianization, complemented by a State viewed as a representative of capital in general, geared toward regulating and completing that integration. Hence the importance of the category “collective consumption”, to account theoretically for the State’s social policies, whose latent effect was to achieve the reproduction of labor power (understood as the capacity for work sold as a commodity in exchange for wages), and thus of most of the urban population, except in the case of marginality. Hence also the importance of the category of “new social movements” capable of organizing forces asserting rights with respect to that State, whose objective inability to solve social problems would lead to a political confrontation and the ultimate questioning of the capitalist system.

Today we face a reality that refuses to be categorized within such schemes:

- Global and national economic restructuring processes (technological revolution, reindustrialization of the periphery, reshaping of markets, etc.) characterized by a trend (for a period that is difficult to predict, but in any event quite prolonged from the political standpoint) towards social and economic disintegration, with tendencies toward dualization,²¹ on the one hand, and further extroversion of so-called urban economies, on the other;

²¹ We speak of “tendencies” and not already existing dual societies. With regard to this, see the works cited in note 18.

- Processes of self-reform of the State (which becomes dismantled/decentralized in its social aspect), of vertiginous privatization of what had formerly been collective consumption, and of transfer of social responsibilities to international organizations and to NGOs, both of which are exempt from any institutionalized political control on the part of the populations toward whom their actions are directed;
- Consequent reduction in the effectiveness of “rights” movements;
- Proliferation of spontaneous popular survival tactics and extension of types of popular management promoted by NGOs and social movements;
- Processes of cultural reshaping, as part of the plan of domination and as result of popular resistance, but with the common element of widely felt loss of a reassuring horizon of personal, familial, community or national development expectations.

Within this context, it is difficult to visualize the city as “the place of reproduction of labor power” or even as “the place of reproduction of the general conditions of capitalistic production”, insisting on the functionalist hypothesis that everything that happens finds its meaning in the needs of capitalist development.

The direction of cities is less and less discernible in terms of the needs of capital accumulation and, consequently, of their negation. Today, the Latin America city is less and less an intentional, linear product of the real-estate agents of accumulation, and more and more a combined result, due to effect of massive, inorganic popular actions governed by “immediatist” survival strategies.

If today a proposal should come from the State for a strong intervention based on the concept of urban order that inspired the city planning proposals of the 1960s, it is possible that the related property registers, regulations governing the use of the land and of public spaces, and charges would affect vast popular sectors as the capital brokers.

The urban question in this decade has largely to do with the resources and methods that capitalism can bring into play

for controlling the social, cultural and political life of our major cities, considering the fact that the “natural” economic mechanisms of integration are losing their effectiveness in the new context.

By the same token, the urban question has to do with finding a popular meaning (i.e., one stemming from that heterogeneous conglomerate that we call “workers”) for our cities, and a proposal along those lines would be able to gain widespread acceptance only if it included a viable proposal for reshaping the economic basis of urban life. This requires building an alternative model, which must be related to present-day reality by means of proposals for collective action arising from the grass roots and grass-roots organizations in each particular situation. Such a model can contribute to the building of a common strategic frame of reference aimed at the development and the economic and political potentiation of the popular sectors in our cities and associated regions.

The attempt to come up with such a project cannot be based on any specific discipline, nor on the central position of the State (and consequently one could not, properly speaking, adopt in advance the title “urban reform”), nor a central role of any other institution (the market, NGOs, etc.), but must operate across the different disciplines, at the interface of all those institutions. Such a process of searching and learning may play a decisive role in helping in the formation of new social and political subjects and in the crystallization of a new culture as a framework for human development in our cities. This is very important at a point when, given the global correlation of forces and the nature of the processes of domination, rather than the formulation of State-originated programmes of rapid transformation, what appears to make sense is thinking in terms of a long-range struggle for the cultural transformation of our societies.

4. Some problems that must be taken into consideration in any present-day urban reform proposal

The social effects of the neoliberal project for Latin America leave plenty of room for progressive forces to win government

positions at the local, state or even national level. This opens up the hope of possible advances along the lines of urban self-reform originating in government spheres, but also poses great difficulties that must be taken into account:

- (a) An urban reform proposal is usually a politico-technical proposal in search of a political base. Yet even if set forth from a position of local power, in order to be effective it must be national in character, for it implies transformations in basic institutions of the social system. And even if it has that character, it is subject to serious limitations, for the processes that are remolding local economies are of a more and more global order.

In any case, the process of urban reform cannot be exclusively local, nor, by the same token, can its power bases. Consequently, it can be properly defined only within the context of an explicit national political design. This gives rise to additional ideological and cultural differences and nuances, which an urban reform movement such as that proposed to this Forum should contemplate, especially if it purports to be global in scope.

- (b) In the present state of things, owing to the pressure of the fundamental problems of reproduction of life, the subjective priority of the popular sectors seems to be not so much housing or services as job opportunities and an income.

If this is so, one may wonder whether it will be appropriate to request, for an urban reform such as that proposed to this forum, popular energy and will that are essential for building an alternative popular economy. This is even more debatable when one considers the additional political wear and tear entailed by the conflicts within the popular camp itself that an accelerated urban reform process would trigger.

To our mind, housing and “urban” services must form part of the articulation among popular economy, State economy and capitalist corporate economy, whose relative weights and terms of trade will be at issue during this decade. And proposals concerning them made from the

popular standpoint must be consistent with the most basic assertions regarding the urban economy (weight of the various economico-social sectors and forms of management, role of the State, generation and dissemination of new technologies, mechanisms for the allocation of resources, function of housing and popular urban habitat, etc.).

For all these reasons, urban reform cannot be a process theorized, designed and directed on the basis of the traditional urban disciplines and their limited utopias and proposals.²²

- (c) A fundamental problem faced by our nations is how to reposition ourselves in the division of labor, redefining our entire productive and social structure. In this respect, for a national and popular project that aspires to hegemony, alliances will be required, and their configuration in each country is a fundamental datum for establishing how far and in what direction urban reform can advance. Such alliances provide the setting for options not only as regards objectives, but also as regards rates of change, resources, technologies, institutions, etc.

Urban reform cannot be approached as a ready-made chapter to be added to one popular project or another, but must proceed from a social project, specified by the concrete conditions obtaining in each country. Furthermore, one can no longer assume it to have a State character, the State being viewed as an apparatus the control of which would enable one to transform society. Rather, the State must be

²² We have put forward a few ideas regarding the relationship between a popular-economy scheme and urban policies in "El desarrollo de la economía popular urbana como contexto para las políticas de vivienda en América Latina", At the Crossroads, 5th International Research Conference on Housing, Montreal, 1992. See also "Del sector informal a la economía popular (Un paso estratégico para el planteamiento de alternativas populares de desarrollo social)", paper presented at the Seminar-Workshop "Integración y Desarrollo Alternativo en América Latina", organized by the Encuentros de Partidos y Movimientos Políticos del Foro de Sao Paulo, Lima, 26-29 February 1992 (Instituto Fronesis, Papers, N° 1, 1992). On the concept of popular economy which we employ one may consult Ciudades sin rumbo, cited above. For one thing, it is not a question of the economy of "the poor", nor of a second-rate economy.

viewed as a form of social and political relationship which society can contribute toward redefining and generating on the basis of the objective needs arising from the changing practices of enhanced reproduction of life in the city.

- (d) Even if one maintains that the resolution of the urban question must proceed through urban reform, the relationship between that reform and sustainable development cannot be fully established unless one has previously gone through the task of establishing within what economic model the urban economy, of which urban services, housing and the popular habitat are only a part, is defined. The determinant character of the economic aspect cannot be effaced by an extreme juricidist or politicist hypothesis.

Though it is not the sole way, we feel that it would be useful to explore this from the standpoint of the possible "urban popular economy" subsystem, which can be created from the existing substrate of popular economic agents, their resources and institutions, their history and their culture - a subsystem which, due to objective necessity, must cease, furthermore, to be strictly urban.

In any event, thinking politically, if we are seeking development with democratic foundations, we must assume the autonomous participation of the majority as a fundamental component. This does not cancel, but rather redefines the place of the intellectual vanguards, avoiding substitutionism. Therefore, there can be no substitutes for the priorities felt by the popular sectors, either. And today those priorities may not involve living in a city arranged in accordance with a certain social rationality, which limits the right of private property, and they may not involve ensuring environmental sustainability: they may instead involve claims for monetary income, for paid employment, for the legalization of de facto possession of real estate and de facto urbanization schemes, or for greater personal security.

These demands, reflected in so many surveys, are the result of a situation of acute crisis in the reproduction of life in the cities and in a popular culture that is the product of a

history of capitalist supremacy. Whether we like it or not, they constitute the empirical starting point, and the gap between them and the utopias of which we can conceive at this point in time must be filled by a dialogic learning process in which both intellectuals and masses can jointly achieve auto-emancipation.

- (e) In any event, we believe that the proposals that will be made by intellectuals must, to fulfill their social role, satisfy certain requirements: they must be responsible, not confuse utopias with reality, take into account the current and possible correlation of forces, and be based on the awareness that their acid test lies not in approval by the members of a forum, even one that includes leaders of social and political movements, but in the long-term possibility of being actually embodied in the daily behavior of the masses as new culture.

In consequence, the proposal that any global urban transformation movement can make must not only be directed to present or future governments as policy proposals, but must also, and fundamentally, be proposals for dialogue, made from a broadened urban perspective, to other social, corporate, political and cultural movements.

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