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‘Der Arbeiter’ (Re-)Industrialization as Universalism?

Krzysztof Nawratek

In the first chapter of *The Urban Revolution*, Henri Lefebvre shows the evolution of the city — from the political city, through the mercantile and industrial city, to its final form, the true ‘urban city’. For Lefebvre, industry is something that wasn’t born in the city.

He asks: ‘Was industry associated with the city?’ And answers: ‘One would assume it to be associated with the *non-city*, the absence or rupture of urban reality.’¹ It was the industry that came to the city, lured by the scent of money, and the sweat and blood of its inhabitants. However, Lefebvre’s attitude towards the industrial city is dialectical. The industrial city destroyed the remnants of the mercantile city and the political city, but it was a ‘creative destruction’, which, in fact, elevated the city to a higher level of development, setting the stage for Lefebvre’s ‘critical zone’, the predicted moment in history in which urbanity becomes a meta-narrative aligning all other stories, and therefore also includes the politics and economics of the city.

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 13.

Chris Evans² describes life in Merthyr Tydfil in the nineteenth century at the beginning of the industrial revolution, where the first workers' strike broke out. Merthyr Tydfil was almost completely devoid of anything that is usually associated with the city — its only public building was a church, street lighting was installed only in the second half of the nineteenth century and the availability of goods and services was very poor (one store to 400 inhabitants, while the norm for British cities was about one to 100 and better). This un-urban city, which at that time was the centre of world industrial production, had no schools and no recreational areas or buildings.

Does the Merthyr Tydfil example (and other cities of the Industrial Revolution) provide sufficient evidence to support Henri Lefebvre's perspective of the non-urban character of industry? Let's go back to 'The Urban Revolution', where he describes the mechanism of the transition from the political city to the mercantile city. Trade and traders were kept out of cities politics; the city was autonomous, and their success was associated with being seen as 'free radicals' with effective mobility.

The position of trade and traders in the city brings to mind the distinction made by Carl Schmitt between 'the orders of the land' and of 'the sea'.³ Schmitt associates 'the order of the sea' with liberal-democratic capitalism, mainly in the American edition, which involves both the freedom and the a-territoriality of trade, but even more so with the contemporary free movement of speculative capital.

Industry, which colonized and transformed the city, can be seen then as a free radical; however its existence was strongly associated with a particular spatial location. In a similar way, the mercantile city was founded when the trade was 'grounded' and traders became the townspeople/bourgeoisie). Industry and the

2 C. Evans, 'Merthyr Tyndif in the Eighteenth Century: Urban by Default', in *Industry and Urbanization in Eighteenth-century England*, eds. P. Clark and P. Corfield, 11–18 (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994).

3 S. Legg (ed.), *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geography of the Nomos* (London: Routledge, 2011).

industrial city are (were) then a spatial entity, belonging to the land order.

This implies that the industrial city was conservative, but its conservatism is understood here as a kind of slow development, providing predictability and a strengthening of the social structures, such as family or local community. This is the conservatism of Fordism and the welfare state (and thus the conservatism of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, but not the radical—especially contemporary—neoliberal right). This is the same conservatism which was first dismantled by the New Left movements growing from the heritage of the May '68 movement (Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution* is obviously the result of May '68 and an important part of its legacy), and then by the conservative revolution of the 1980s and the excesses of neoliberalism. But let's go back to the first half of the twentieth century, to the time when the industrial city seemed to be the triumphant revolutionary change. Let's follow a guide to this imaginary and never-realized world: Ernst Jünger's *Der Arbeiter*.⁴

Der Arbeiter is an extraordinary book—one aspect of its uniqueness, for example, is the fact that it was never translated in full into English. Reading *Der Arbeiter* one may feel slightly confused—on the one hand, this book is considered to be a prophetic vision of modern society; on the other hand, it is difficult to forget that it was published a year before the Nazis came to power and that Jünger himself was associated with the intellectual circles of the German 'conservative revolution' of the Weimar Republic.

Despite the fact that it is difficult to directly associate the author with the Nazi regime, it is also not easy to consider him as a declared anti-fascist. It is important, though, to consider Jünger's relationship with fringes of fascist ideas in the context of the

4 Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1941 [1932]). I have been using Polish edition: E. Jünger, *Robotnik: Panowanie i forma bytu* (Warsaw: PWN, 2010). All quotations refer to this edition.

industrial city, because the specificity of the economic structure of the Third Reich highlights crucial aspects of the industrial-city phenomenon. It shows that in fact it doesn't matter in what system the industrial city existed, whether it was the capitalist America or the communist Soviet Union. What distinguishes the industrial city is a kind of 'transcendent organicity'.

In his classic work, 'The structure of Nazi economy', Maxime Y. Sweezy⁵ shows a fully capitalist economic structure, which could even be described as neoliberal. The Nazi economy was focused on the strengthening of the private capital (the 'Nazi privatization' as a prototype for contemporary neoliberal policies is described by Germa Bel),⁶ and on the development of large-scale industry and agriculture at the expense of small family farms and businesses.

In the context of *Der Arbeiter*, Gehrard Schultz's opinion, expressed in the book *Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung* is crucial: 'Instead of a number of economic objectives, the state has adopted one — a total mobilization of the entire nation for the total war.'⁷ 'Total mobilization' is one of the key concepts that Jünger introduced to contemporary socio-political thought.⁸ For the purpose of this text, the key observation concerns the location of the order-making and sense-giving structure to the industrial city which is external to the industrial city itself. I argue that the industrial city does not exist through industry only, but by giving it meaning beyond production.

5 Marine Sweezy, *The Structure of the Nazi Economy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).

6 Germa Bel, 'Against the Mainstream: Nazi Privatization in 1930s Germany', *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 1 (2010): 34–55.

7 Quoted in S. Ratner, 'An Inquiry into the Nazi War Economy, Review of *Design for Total War: Arms and Economics in The Third Reich*, by Bernice A. Carroll', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12, no. 4 (1970): 466–72.

8 Ernst Jünger, 'Total Mobilisation', in *Krieg und Krieger* (Berlin: Junker und Dunnhaupt, 1930). Polish translation in: Wojciech Kunicki, *Rewolucja konserwatywna w Niemczech 1918–1933* (Poznań: [publisher], 1999); English translation available from: <http://anarchistwithoutcontent.wordpress.com/2010/12/05/junger-total-mobilization/>.

It is this ‘transcendent’ sense that constitutes the industrial city, rather than a mere presence of the industry in the city. This transcendent order was present in the form of the totalitarian structures of the Third Reich, the communism of war, the American New Deal and finally in the form of a welfare state as an attempt to build a truly inclusive and integrated society. The industrial city — similar to today’s neoliberal city — was a result of a particular political vision based on certain values and ideas.

Jünger describes modern society as a work society, in which work is ‘a form of being’. There is nothing that is not work, and there is no one who does not work. Work eliminates all differences and hierarchies: ‘All the decisive mobilization orders do not run from the top down, but emerge as a revolutionary goal, making it more effective.’⁹ Work eliminates democracy as a choice and replaces it with democracy as act — ‘Acceptance takes place through pure participation, and therefore through the participation in voting, regardless of which party wins’¹⁰ — and it challenges the privilege of individual freedom.

Interestingly, Jünger not only challenges the notion of the individual but also the mass (as a collection of individuals):

The movements of the masses have lost their irresistible charm wherever they encounter strong resistance — as in two or three old soldiers behind a working machine gun [who] were not concerned with a report that they are being charged by a whole battalion. Mass today is incapable of charging, it is incapable even of defence.¹¹

The idea of the worker (*Arbeiter*) seems totalistic, but it is an inclusive totality (I would like to make a distinction between ‘totalistic’ and ‘totalitarian’ and I would argue that *Der Arbeiter* does not praise totalitarianism): no one is excluded, because everyone is a part of the great totalistic machinery: ‘Man is the

9 Jünger, *Robotnik*, 241.

10 *Ibid.*, 240.

11 Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, 109.

source of natural wealth, and no state plan will ever be perfect unless it can draw from this source¹² (in this context, of course, the Third Reich, with its master race ideology and concentration camps, is not a realization of Ernst Jünger's vision).

The world presented in *Der Arbeiter* is not the world of class or nation (although Jünger sees the Germans as the vanguard of the world), it is also not the world of profit and exploitation, as Jünger writes, 'Private initiative will be acceptable when it obtains a status of a specialized type of work — in other words[,] when it is controlled within the broader process.'¹³ It is a world of 'Plan' and 'Higher Purpose'. It is a world in which everything makes sense — control does not come 'from above', for there is no institutional Big Brother or any controlling authority — but it is through its very own logic of existence that this world gives itself meaning: 'Every movement of his hand, even while cleaning the stables from manure, has its rank, if it does not feel as an abstract work, but fits within [a] greater and sensible order.'¹⁴

Historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and Bernice A. Carroll (the author of *Design for Total War*),¹⁵ conclude with surprise the lack of total control in the Third Reich economy, replaced by a totalitarian socio-political formation. And it is this 'external' control that appears to have the dominant role. So I agree with Lefebvre's observation of 'externality' of the agent of change to the city (whether it was trade or industry), but I disagree with the stipulated imminence of the 'ultimate form of the city' as something desirable. To some extent, the existing model of neoliberal urbanization is a nightmarish version of Lefebvre's vision. It's a nightmare because this vision is closed, and therefore dead.

Jünger's book begins with a discussion of the bourgeois attempt to suppress the Worker by shaping him in a bourgeois fashion. *Der Arbeiter* is a song about the world in which the bour-

12 Ibid., 272.

13 Ibid., 275.

14 Ibid., 281–82.

15 Bernice A. Carroll, *Design for Total War: Arms and Economics in the Third Reich* (The Hague: Mouton De Gruyter, 1968).

geoisie lost and the totality of work conquered all other logics. Our world is obviously not the world predicted by Jünger — on the contrary, the Bourgeois defeated the Worker, debased and destroyed him. In this context, we can finally ask the question: Is the industrial city a dead idea too? Is re-industrialization just a fantasy of another time and another world?

The discussion about re-industrialization in Western Europe and the US began only a few years ago, when the 2008 crisis made obvious the bankruptcy of the model of urban development based on property speculation and liquid capitalism. Re-Industrialization can be defined in many ways and does not necessarily apply only to cities. That is why I would rather talk about the industrial city 2.0 — the ‘comeback’ of the industry to the cities is not crucial in itself; what’s more important is the empowerment and embedding of the industry in the socio-economic structure of the city.

Using New York as an example, Sarah Crean¹⁶ indicates the emerging networks between different actors involved in industrial production — from representatives of the ‘creative class’, like designers and engineers, through producers and finally consumers. Also, at the institutional level new networks emerge linking manufacturers, suppliers, distributors and consumers.

This feature of industrial production — creation of relationships — connects in an interesting way with today’s obsession with networking and the social network. Creating relationships and systems of mutual dependency is the most important feature of contemporary thinking about industry and production based on ‘industrial ecology’ and ‘circular economy’.

Production based on the idea of a ‘circular economy’ is not a simple process and, besides technological innovations, requires negotiation skills. In a circular economy, not all ideas can be applied directly without changes to production technology and the negotiation of legal obstacles. However, the effort seems to be profitable, and not only for financial reasons, but precisely

16 Sarah Crean, ‘In the Shadow of Real Estate, Linking Designers and Manufacturers’, *Progressive Planning* 190 (Winter 2012): 24–26.

because of forced innovations — technological, social and legal. But what is most important here is the anti-individualistic and inclusive perspective, changing not only the work relationship but, in fact, its power to reconstruct the whole society.

As I tried to show, the industrial city (as opposed to the city in which industry is merely present) is a coherent socio-economic project, reinforcing (or even constituting) the city as a subject, understood as a coherent narrative binding residents, institutions, space, activities and everything material in the city. However, the industrial city cannot exist ‘by itself’; it must be established and maintained by the outside socio-political and cultural frame, which is transcendent to the materiality of the city. I am not necessarily thinking here in terms of the exterior in the territorial sense (state or supra-state structure), but more about a vision that exceeds the city and gives it a non-immanent purpose.

The industrial city 2.0 is the opposite of the contemporary city, based on the extremely individualistic philosophy of competition. So it is the city based on overcoming selfishness and on the construction of a new, inclusive community (inclusive, however, but not necessarily democratic in the sense that we are used to today). History has not ended, neoliberalism was only a temporary aberration, everything is still ahead of us — we just need to think and act to reach beyond here-and-now. Revolution is always rooted in transcendence.