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Beyond violence.
Toward the politics of inhabitation

Camillo Boano

Violence challenges any analytical focus due its ubiquity and multifarious forms. From the intimate to the global, from the colonial to the capitalist, from the racial to the epistemic and from the personal to the societal. At the time of writing the COVID-19 epidemic violence has covered the entire planet in a deadly way. We are witnessing the violence of the rising medico-techno-scientific state that has emerged strongly in discourses and policies; the physical violence resurrected in places such as Myanmar, Lebanon, Palestine and Colombia, to cite few, and the violence of any direct engagement with living creatures and earth preservation that keep erupting under the camouflage of pro transition and technoeconomic recovery processes. It seems we are left with the question Giorgio Agamben (2020) asked in the mist of the pandemic: "what is a society that has no value other than survival?" A provocative question, as usual, that recalls a sort of *vita minima*, a bare life, as well some sort of grand universal planetary schema. Taking this lead, let me start to reflect for a moment on the city that I have engaged with most recently – Beirut – on violence and its beyond as inhabitation.

The extensivity of violence in Beirut, (the civil War, the 2006 Israel bombing, the 2018 uprising and its financial crisis, the 4th August 2020 port explosion and of course the pandemic) cannot be simply framed with the notion of crisis, even if incremental, connected, overlapping and structural. What is emerging there is an exhausted territory, predated by the absence of the public, brutalised by the fragility of the common and vandalised by the preclusion of a thinkable and imaginable future. Lebanon is living in a catastrophic present. Catastrophe is not a violent event that happens once and for all, that then goes away after having accomplished its gruesome work of leaving a world of ruins, to be fixed, restored and recomposed with the limited resources of its people. For Lebanese peoples it has been a never-ending process, which accumulates and sediments, and that erodes the vitalist and progressive message of those who are working to advocate reclaiming publicness, justice, and equity. Violence is not a linear production of events but a manifold and longitudinal overlapping force of dispossessions, explosions, removal, separation, excavation, evictions that produce complex and contradictory spatial implications.

Research on violence asserts that violence goes well beyond physical harm. While suggesting there is no agreed definition of urban violence, Pavoni, and Tulumello (2020:49) warn us against the oversimplification of such complex relations, especially when the adjective 'urban' is just "referring to the place (the container) in which instances of violence would occur, rather than as a spatial process constitutive" to it. Challenging simultaneously "the static understanding of the urban and the exogenous understanding of violence" (p.50) the authors look at the ways contemporary urban and capitalist-urban discourses are "framing urban violence as an exogenous anomaly to be eradicated, [and] generate the pervasive atmospheres of fear that increasingly characterise contemporary urban

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space" (p.51).

Considering their reflection, Beirut becomes represents the contemporary history of the self-destructive gesture that continuously repeats itself and, by doing so, sets the foundation for a new condition of destruction. Every massive violent event in history was preceded by sequences of smaller events occurring within short periods of time that prepared the ground for additional violence in time and space and led to the last big port explosion; the banking sector crisis with all its destructive implications; the collapsed economy; political crisis; institutional corruption; government inefficiency; the electricity shortage as well as the stress associated with the recent virus. Every violence set the stage for a new time and additional violence. Perhaps, Beirut is telling a much bigger story. A story of perpetual planetary conflict, close to the one that Guinard, Latour and Lin used to title the 2020 Taipei Biennial: "*You and I don't live on the same planet*" making Lebanon where several planets collide. The planetarium includes: 'planet globalization', constructed around the promise of modernity in its world-making violence with its massive rise in inequality, neoliberalism and unlimited growth; 'planet security', where people betrayed by the ideals and the violence of globalization, ask for a piece of land – a fenced or a bordered haven to live in, protected from others; 'planet escape' where a limited number of privileged people invest hyper-techno fix security solutions or leave the earth. For all the others excluded by the modernizing project, the privileged full-security-bordered-land or the escape idealized-communities-of-equals, the only option is to be in an inhabitable territory, that the curators call the 'terrestrial planet.'

How is it possible to leave destitute the power of violence and find new ways of inhabiting the urban planet?

This metaphor of planetary conflict is maybe illustrating a form of violence that is simultaneously destructive and constructive: not an interruption but rather a continuous process, that traverses the political history of the planet itself. The metaphorical landscape emerging in the terrestrial planet, that beyond the explicit reference to Beirut, is the one that Maliq Simone would call "uninhabitable"; not because the conditions and limited or impossible capacities of people reside, to shelter or to find a refuge but, rather, because what remains is not intended for habitation: it is a territory that exceed consideration of human emplacement and manifold modalities of livability. Lebanon is inhabitable. It is at the same time a space of exception and an unfinished project, evident in its fragmented, plural, uncertain and temporally precarious grammar, always in motion despite its apparent fixity with a constant movement between past and present. It is exceptional because the very possibility of living and inhabiting has always been inextricably intertwined with violence: the promise of death, destruction, disappearance, displacement, eviction that is regularly and invariably fulfilled. However, the inhabitable is also a continuous creative process through which inhabitants withdraw from death in order to escort it, constituting an industrious community capable of building, maintaining and repairing its living space. A tenacious struggle to resist the violent subtractions of the future, of space, of possibilities, through creating space and forms of life. The intelligence of the urban, when seen beyond the absolute centrality of its violence, is its ability to express politics, excess of life and places of possibility. It is a power that should certainly not be romanticised as it is always constituted by a form of violence as a generative matrix. Lebanon is continuously being produced by the operative efforts of the many voices of resistance in the street, in the arts, as well as in academia. Despite this it remains incalculable. It transcends its historicity of inhabitation, but that cannot be framed under any calculation, any norm, any quality.

So, what is inhabiting the uninhabitable? How is it possible to leave destitute the power of violence

and find new ways of inhabiting the urban planet?

One way is to refer to Heidegger who reminds us that human exists insofar as they inhabit: transforming imperfectly an abstract space in some way – imprecise and precarious – in a place that generates the possibility of intimacy. However, the term *Bauen* used by Heidegger translates as *to built* in the sense of to dwell, but also as to preserve and to cultivate, which refers to protecting rather than producing. This interesting connection of dwelling to preserving and cultivating shifts focus not only on to being, staying and existing, but also on to a more complex "ecology" through which inhabitants are constituting an industrious community capable of building, maintaining and repairing its living space. Inhabitation means re-centring the affirmative dimension of enduring relations and it develops an idea of collective life that tenaciously responds to aspects of life and to modes of living, extractive practices and it constructs different horizons of hope.

This is exemplified in (refuge) camps and camp urbanism. With inhabitation, camps expand from exception to become sites of a politics that takes shape around habitation: the continuation of habitual, bodily practices, the small and mundane acts of maintenance or a continuous struggle to cultivate and protect a minimum space of survival. This impossibility of building and dwelling is the essence of the camp: always and already exhaustion and inhabitation. Recalling that Auschwitz was designed in 1941 by Karl Bischoff and Fritz Ertl, both graduate of the Bauhaus, Agamben (2019) asks: "how could it be possible that an architect [. . .] built a structure in which under no circumstances was it possible to dwell, in the original sense of being at home [. . .] building the perfect place of the impossibility of inhabitation." With this example, he portrays how "architecture at present is facing the historical condition of building the inhabitable" (ibid.). With no inhabitation only building is possible and the camp, as matrix of exception, will persist.

So, "what does it mean to inhabit (*abitare*)" asks Agamben in the preface of Giovanni Attili's *Civita* (2021): "do still we know what it means to inhabit a village, a city, a territory? and what is a village, a city, a territory if we think of it from the point of view of inhabiting?" Civita di Bagnoregio, the subject of the book, is not a camp and it is not in Lebanon. It is a medieval village in Central Italy, built on a gully, a geomorphological zone that is always in the process of sinking into the void in the Lazio hinterland. For Agamben, questioning inhabitation from such spaces means revealing that "the very possibility of living and inhabiting is indissolubly intertwined with death." Attili "reconstructs the desire and the practice of the people of Civita di Bagnoregio over the centuries to inhabit their land, the marvellous stubbornness with which they continue to cling to 'their tuff hillock' suspended in the void and to keep intact, and if possible, improve, the form of life that has been handed down through the generations. The people of Civita have turned their land into a habitable place [. . .] they have created and continued to forge something without which they seem to have a certain unease: their own presence." For Agamben inhabitation "it is a creative process through which they withdraw from death in order to escort it" (Agamben, 2021:11-12). Therefore, what seems to matter is an inhabiting life. For Agamben "to inhabit means to be in what one holds dearest, one's own and at the same time common. That is, to be and to enjoy, that is, to enjoy, one's own nature. It is certainly a way of resisting, of staying, and of preventing oneself from being dragged elsewhere" (2020).

If the uninhabitable is the impossibility of becoming home; of hosting futures; of dwelling relations and to inhabit political projects, and even (in the case of global violent border regimes) the preclusion of the material possibility of staying in a place, then gestures of inhabitation must be becoming livable, if not 'home'. It must be livable as a terrain, beyond the emergency from which to think and act, even for a politics that seeks nothing more than to overcome the primacy of life.

Camp urbanism, informal urbanization and, more generally, all the forms that inhabit the uninhabitable, without essentializing them, are arguably the continuous creative process through which

inhabitants withdraw from death in order to escort it, constituting an industrious community capable of building, maintaining and repairing its living space. This impossibility of building and dwelling is the essence of the camp. With no inhabitation only building is possible and the camp, as matrix of exception, will persist.

Returning to the terminology of the Taipei Biennial, the potential for deactivating violence lies in the everyday resistance or in inhabitation intended as "counter territorialization" (Boano and Astolfo, 2020) in a "politics of inhabitation" (Abourahme, 2020: 40). This is an inversion. It is not another planet, (in the language of the Taipei Biennial) but an act of an inverse nature: a reconfiguration of the conditions of possibility. It is an effort of unmaking, of redefinition to re-signify territories; ultimately, to undo or deactivate an established territorial order of modernity, security and escape. People's practices are a multiform remaking of spatial ordering of state sanctioned planned violence that intentionally produces capital accumulation, expulsions, and marginalization. It consists of a destituent (Tarì, 2017; Laudani, 2016; Boano, 2020) politics to create the conditions (an empty space) so that another politics (one that today seems impossible) can happen. Destituent is a politics not founded by power. It indicates a movement to be made: to unleash a politics of the event. The event of politics nests in a singular desertion from what is, breaking the normal course of history and producing a multiple, ecstatic, plurality – not another planet, but another cosmogony. Not the one displayed in Taipei Biennial planetarium rather a different one. Maybe, the one emerging from Giorgio Manganelli's *La Palude Definitiva* (the definitive swamp) "a place where it is difficult to enter and impossible to leave" (p.43). In the image of the swamp is a perfect image for the exhausted capacity of thinking beyond the violence of 'planet terrestrial'. The swamp is a space where knowledge mixes to give deadly form to coercion: "the swamp appears to me as [...] a noble and lowest place, a central and peripheral place, well-formed and deformed, shapeless, deformed, obscene, vile, mephitic and at the same time troubled" (p.57). The 'proper' of the inhabitation is not given and, therefore, its great intensity is given precisely because it dwells directly on the substance of politics, or rather in its abyss, on what makes it possible everywhere. Two paradigms converge in the swamp as in Beirut: an uninhabitable without any inhabitation as well the paradoxical but destituent process of inhabiting the uninhabitable. It is no coincidence that the centrality Manganelli's swamp evokes an epistemology of living where you can feel "a profound sense of rest, as if the fatigue of the future dissolved into a contrary procedure, as if yesterday, the uninterrupted yesterday would give refreshment to all tomorrows, the impossible tomorrows" (p.59). The politics of inhabitation might need to be imagined in the swamp, maybe in Beirut as in Civita, but beyond the planetary prospect of constitutive violence to envision a destituent gesture.

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