Décollage city

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Abstract

This research intends to investigate the condition of the 21st-century contemporaneity globally designed and locally struggled no longer by a geopolitical principle, but by the principle of connectivity.

Connectivity is examined both as a mean, so a world-wide process of intensification of mobility, energy and communication networks, where infrastructure play as a protagonist passing through divisions; as well as an end, representing the figures of an open and connected society.

Focusing on the dislocated urban territory found on the Belt and Road Initiative global network, the aim is to examine how the strategic role of infrastructure can determine the processes of inclusion and exclusion of space, questioning its contradictory effects on urban and territorial forms.

Thus, the inquiry explores the concept and technique of décollage as an urban enclave development or envelopment strategy that interprets how the smoothed infrastructural space produces striated fragments by tearing off, unsticking and subtracting the territory. The dynamic city that emerges from the connectivity "floor"-oriented re-mapping of the world's "ground" surface is produced by both actions of extraterritorial exclusion and urban enclave constitution.

This approach moves forward the re-reading of the legacy of postmodern approaches in order to experiment the potential effectiveness of the critical approach, of the tools and methods to critically address the complexity of today's urban question.

1. Everything flows

The world we live in has never been this connected: contemporary cities and territories are globally designed and locally struggled no longer by a geopolitical principle, but by the impulse of connectivity.

On the one hand, similarly to the informational field, the term connectivity refers to the ability of a network to exchange effectively informational flows between its nodes, or components, through interactions for which the system is respectively influenced by.

On the other, as stated by Manual Castells (Castells, 2010: 409):

> Our society is constructed around flows: flows of capital, flows of information, flows of organisational interaction... Flows are not just one element of social

organisation: they are the expression of processes dominating our economic, political and symbolic life.

Hence, concerning the urban condition of the twenty-first century, flows of people, flows of goods, flows of energy and communication reveal how the processes of space production and consumption operate. But nowadays, the infrastructure space is something more than merely passive hardware or the urban substructure, on the contrary, it is the urban structure itself; an active form or operating system that mediates information and shapes the city (Easterling, 2014: 11-14).

Furthermore, the representation of the network is increasingly significant and reveals a world-wide re-mapping of the world: from geography based on political divisions between states, many figures of functional geography emerge on the terrestrial surfaces.

In fact, the portrayal of the infrastructural network is currently much more relevant than the political cartography: the expression of power is no more related on defensive borders, even if its rhetoric still is, but it lies on the networks of highways, railways, airports, harbours, pipelines, supply chains through which finance, energy, goods, people and knowledge can materially and virtually flow. As the statement "Connectivity is destiny" (Khanna, 2016: 36) may suggest, and the numerous infrastructure-driven projects materialize, the intensification of geography through connectivity lays surfaces for economic, urban and social development.

In its broader meaning, connectivity can be read both as a direct expression of means, and therefore as a process of modernisation and technological innovation that needs to exist even more rationally, efficiently and dangerously faster; that as an end, so a figure that brings with it the narration of an open and connected society.

1.1. Connectivity by means

In the past, ancients used to build their villages in favourable sites along rivers or next to the sea; they well understood that the key for their villages to become the cities we all know today lay into effective access to the rest of the world. Over the centuries, the military born logistics had developed at a fast pace, marked by geographical discoveries, scientific inventions and their respective technological innovation; in order to organize rationally resources, commercial trade and territories.

Logistics grew and evolved by means of steam machines, railroads, electricity, navigable channels and waterways, aircrafts, shipping containers and ICT, so every device able to improve the actualization of a strategy reducing friction or, in other words, to improve the circulation of goods and people.

Especially starting from the second half of the twentieth century with the intensification of transport, energy and telecommunication networks, "logistics turned the whole world into a smooth surface for exchange: into a unique 'floor' for production" (Sanaan Bensi, Negar; Marullo, 2018: 1).

Moreover, the voracious globalized market not only tends to fill every gap into the supply and demand, but it constantly needs to develop more functionally and effectively.

This ongoing process can be addressed to a paramount effect: as generally every upgrade of IT devices corresponds to a compression of the third dimension, the depth, and to a performative update of the user interface; every upgrade of the physical infrastructure of transportation and

communication networks and its territorial organization causes a radical change that is the compression of space and time.

Firstly, "the shrinking map of the world through innovations in transport which annihilate space through time" (Harvey, 1989: 241) attests that, according to the logic of capitalism, the production of space and time is compressed in order to achieve the shortest turnover.

Secondly, these transformations have not only an economical impact, but also on the political and cultural sphere (Harvey, 1989: 240-259):

> These processes so revolutionized the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves.

Thus, connectivity means strongly influence the space production and consumption processes; and therefore, not only our experience but also its perception and imagination, transforming both representations of space and spaces of representation (Harvey, 1989: 221).

1.2. Connectivity by ends

Dealing with our experience, perception, and imagination, connectivity depicts powerful images. Overlapping geographical surfaces, lines had over history the symbolic power to go far beyond their purely ephemeral dimension, shaping our spatial reality.

During the Cold War, a line had been dividing Europe from north to south, and for extension, the whole world in two alignments. When in 1989 the wall of West Berlin, the island immersed in the Soviet sea and surrounded by its own architecture, collapsed pronouncing the end of the war, it became possible to realize the dream of a united Europe, imagined since the end of the Second World War.

Today the territories represented by that line, the Iron Curtain, are part of the green infrastructure, which is the ecological network and living memorial of the European Green Belt Initiative. The last decades saw emerging strategies of connectivity into the material reality as much as into the immaterial one; for instance supply chains, economic corridors, transnational and interregional networks and landscapes, cross border cooperations. For example, in the European Union there are the nine "core network corridors": the Scandinavian-Mediterranean Corridor, the North Sea-Baltic Corridor, the North Sea-Mediterranean Corridor, the Baltic-Adriatic Corridor, the Orient/East-Med Corridor, the Rhine-Alpine Corridor, the Atlantic Corridor, the Rhine-Danube Corridor and the Mediterranean Corridor.

These figures demonstrate a shift from the ground of strict dividing borders to the field of connections that underlines one deeper meaning, which therefore is (Papam Papamattheakis, 2018: 7):

Mobility of people and supply of goods are two separate types of circulation, for the nature of the object to be moved differs: living beings or lifeless object.

Thus, the infrastructural networks, not only as spaces of circulation but in their wider framework, create public space, as the term *public works* used to indicate.

1.3. Smoothed and striated space

Reckoning with Deleuze and Guattari's thought on opposing smoothed and striated spaces of , respectively, the nomadic and the sedentary, the war machine and the state apparatus, that

exist only in their mixture; it is possible to question whether the production process of infrastructure space creates smoothed or striated, inclusive or exclusive surfaces, or both (Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, 1987: 474-500).

The distinction between floor and ground suggests that (Papam Papamattheakis, 2018: 17):

Although the 'smooth' spaces of the ground have been progressively striated by floors, in order to be controlled and measured, various scattered errancies and contradictions, from unpredictable weather phenomena to pirates, sustain a certain smoothness. Despite the prevalence of the floor from language to practise, the ground retains its dynamic of emergence.

In fact, so much so that in terms of connectivity, infrastructural networks are smoothed "floor" surfaces that lacerates the world-wide "ground" surfaces but, actually, the smoothness exists uniquely from the inside, intensely and voluntarily excluded from the outside.

Stretching on the ground the figures of connectivity beyond its scales, the contradictory effects of space inclusion and exclusion come to the surface.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative

One of this figure is the embodiment of the power of connectivity, or, the infrastructures of power: the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), named initially also the One Belt One Road, is the largest global scale development strategy driven by connective infrastructure investments ever seen in history, that is drawing and building "the map of a new world order" (Khanna, 2016; Maas, 2019: 244).

2.1. From the inside out

Scaling in and out the natural and political geography, the materiality of the initiative consist of overland and shipping connections joining China, Eurasia and Africa: the Silk Road Economic Belt, or land economic corridors (the New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor, the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, the China-Central Asia – Western Asia Economic Corridor, the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), and the Maritime Silk Road, corresponding to sea routes to Africa and the Mediterranean. Since its announcement in 2013, the BRI is involving approximately 65 countries, almost one-third of the world trade and world GDP, linking more than half of the world population (Derudder, Ben Joseph Romain; Liu, Xingjian; Kunaka, 2018: 3-5).

The logistics development is represented as a network of lines and nodes, or supply chains and strategic urban clusters or trade and travel hub, whether existing, planned or under construction. The physical dimension of this figure actually includes highways, roads, tunnel and bridges, iron railways and high-speed railways, pipelines, internet cables; but also ports, artificial islands, dams, solar power farms and a variegate typology of Special Economic Zones (SEZ).

Moreover, the nature of flows that pass from China to the rest of the world portrays three trajectories. Firstly, the inland routes polarize the strong economies, from China throughout Mongolia (Erenhot, Ulaanbaatar), Russia (Moscow), Poland (Warsaw), Germany (Berlin) and the Netherlands (Rotterdam). Secondly, the raw materials circulate through Kazakhstan (Khorgos, Almaty), Kirghizistan (Biškek), Uzbekistan (Tashkent), Turkmenistan (Ashgabat), Iran (Gorgan,

Teheran) and Turkey (Istanbul). The third flow concerning the denser urban clusters in the world, inhabit the "String of Pearls" or ASEAN region and the maritime route from Shangai to Dubai through Singapore (the Pearl River Delta Metropolitan Region, Yangtze River Delta Region, Metro Manila, Jakarta Region, West Malaysia, Dhaka region, Kolkata Metropolitan Area, Colombo, Gwadar) (Hilgefort, 2019: 246-257).

All of these projects and routes would materialize a faster, wider and operative network; in other words, to optimize and maximize the efficiency of the emerging global supply chain system.

Hence, an initiative as the BRI outlines a diversity of links where the smoothing process of geographical and political surfaces tends to implicate a re-mapping of the world connectivity map. From one hand, the re-mapping morphs surfaces overlapping political and geographical layers, where the transformation of borders brings both inclusive operations if network stakeholders actually share infrastructure to improve their efficiency, but also exclusive operations where extraterritorial forms are created.

2.2. From the outside in

Let everything that's been planned come true. Let them believe. And let them have a laugh at their passions. Because what they call passion actually is not some emotional energy, but just the friction between their souls and the outside world.

(Tarkovskij, 1979)

Although the rhetoric of infrastructure claims an idea of an open and hyper-connected society, and the logic of capital reveals it at least economically, the logistics of facts arise from the contradictory process of simultaneous space inclusion and exclusion.

As a matter of fact, those connective powerful lines representing multidimensional networks, as the BRI, don't convert merely into highways, railroads or pipelines but something beyond; this phenomenon consists of a sprawling topology of enclaves, where territories and cities blow their boundaries (Hilgefort, 2019).

The infrastructure space across political and legal borders obtain a change in status: it becomes an exception. Therefore, when those figures stretch and reach the regional scale urbanism, as in the numerous megastructural projects, that means (Easterling, 2014: 15):

A site of multiple, overlapping, or nested forms of sovereignty, where domestic and transnational jurisdiction collide, infrastructure space becomes a medium of what might be called extrastatecraft—a portmanteau describing the often undisclosed activities outside of, in addition to, and sometimes in partnership with statecraft.

Actually, this phenomenon isn't brand-new, on the contrary, it boasts over history;

indeed it is interesting to observe that many nodes of the BRI maritime constellation, as Bejing-Tianjin, Shangai-Pudong, Guangzhou, Xiamen Island, Hong Kong-Shenzen, Singapore, Djibouti, but also Athens-Pireus among others, already embedded the status of free-port in the past. When the global world trade accelerated after that the Suez Canal and Panama Canal realization (opened respectively in 1869 and 1914), early free zones start to appear. Then, another boost influenced the international commerce, highly improved by the arrival of the shipping container; therefore the free zones

started to sprout and conquer also inland territories, embedding in their program the process of manufacturing.

The last decades of the twentieth century registered the rise and the specialization of the free zones in functional terms, in other words as performance-specific, until reaching their exceptional status quo and act as cities (Easterling, 2014: 25-69). The recent explosion of this extraterritorial enclaves is in fact remarkably unprecedented; and it reveals that (Easterling, 2014: 25):

The Zone has not always been the world's global urban addiction, once relegated to the backstage, it has in the space of a few years, evolved from a fenced off enclave for where housing and manufacturing to a world-city template.

Specifically in China, the relevant economic and social development caused complex effects on spatial transformation (Bonino, Michele; Governa, Francesca; Repellino, Maria Paola; Sampieri, 2019: 97). Where the sprawling zones and new towns both design an urban structure that differs from the concentrated Maoist city, which has nearly dissipated; instead, the emerging patchworked urban field is characterized by customized segregation and branded specificity. These enclaves, referring to the broader enclave urbanism, are marked by the desire to separate the insiders from the outsiders; whether culturally, functionally, economically or physically (Wissink, van Kempen, Fang, & Li, 2012: 1-15).

In their inside realm these enclaves are autonomous and dynamic urban islands, that act as a typology of ambivalent borders. In fact, according to their open or closed condition, the presence of fenced barriers, hidden security systems or constantly made and re-made boundaries, entails a

permanent adaptation through hybridization and guarantee a multitude of urban gradient (Sohn, 2018: 26-30).

Another example is the urbanization trajectory in Metro Manila (Philippines) that includes SEZs and gated community; acting as second generation spaces of exception, these enclaves connect to the global infrastructural network but remain dislocated from within; thus naturally and spatially disentangled (Kleibert, 2018).

If the infrastructural surface requires its own smoothness without interruptions in order to let flows circulate more and more efficiently, and its action inevitably excludes any obstacle, preserving and empowering its statute.

Therefore, the inner smoothed space of enclaves needs to exclude the outside throughout the streaking of surfaces. In this way, the transition from territorial exclave to urban enclave generate rips or fragments, which form different kinds of islands with their own extraterritorial autonomy, that "in the whole, although they are not encircled by either sea or ocean, collectively form an archipelago" (Eyal Weizman, 2005), or the lacerated body of the metropolis.

3. Towards a décollage city

The décollage is the artistic technique that moves forward a subtractive action on the urban landscape, throughout operations that unsticks, rips, cuts, tear off, scratches selected parts in order to discover new meaning from the original image.

Mostly linked to the Nouveau Realisme as the works by Mimmo Rotella and

Wolf Vostell, the décollage is the opposite procedure of collage and assemblage: it works with fragments and striatures that change the in-between relations.

Stretching the scale of this splintering process to the urban space, where as for the stolen and ripped advertising posters the subtractive action of scratched fragments uncover unexpected relations over the resultant surface, questioning its new figure; or a décollage city.

This action, or urban décollage, could be explored as compared to the legacy of postmodern urban culture (Allen, 1997; Hertweck, Florian; Marot, 2013; Rowe, Colin; Koetter, 1978) into the contemporary urban condition, marked by a shift from the form to the relation, from meaning to performance, from objects to fields (Allen, 1997).

The dynamic city that emerges from the connectivity "floor"-oriented re-mapping of the world's "ground" surface is produced by both actions of extraterritorial exclusion and urban enclave constitution. Everything flows, but only from the smoothed inside, whereas the striated outside is the subject of an overwhelming process of exceptional fragmentation, or urban décollage.

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