

A Brief Explanation of the Concept of Territory and Its Implications

Miguel Amorós

2013

Contents

I. The Concept	3
II. Fragmentation	7
III. Planning	10
IV. Defense	13

I. The Concept

The Chinese mountain Lushan is often enveloped in clouds and it is often hard to get a good look at it. Su Dongpo, a poet of the Song Dynasty, said, in verse:

“How could one tell what Mt. Lushan really looks like
when one is in the midst of the mountain all along?”

The expression was used to point out the real difficulty that stood in the way of knowing the real essence of things, since this essence is never immediately and clearly displayed to the understanding that soars above them.¹ This poetic metaphor will serve us as a cautionary warning before we address the idea of “territory”, as we are immersed in a fog that we can only dissipate by abstracting its development, in order to thus demonstrate just what the “territory” is in reality. Otherwise, to resort once again to a Chinese proverb, we shall catch nothing but wind and we shall harvest nothing but shadows.

This enterprise will not be easy because we do not live in a “beautiful totality” like that of the ancients, where space is conflated with the Cosmos, populated by living forces in perfect harmony, and where individuals and “mother” Earth dialectically constitute a single whole. In epochs of crisis the unifying power disappears from social life and its elements do not interact reciprocally, which is why they cease to relate to one another and become disconnected, behaving like independent and even hostile realities. The concept no longer corresponds with the object, and consciousness has no other remedy than to look beyond itself: the anti-developmental critique is the contemporary representation of this necessary quest. The Territory confronts individuals, who are also separated from each other, as something alien, despite the fact that it is their own product. When an urbanist uses the term, he is referring to a reserve of space in the vicinity of an urban area, or the interstitial spaces between conurbations. This idea is closely related to that of “land”, an undeveloped surface whose use and destiny must be regulated by way of a correct zoning policy. A politician or a real estate developer would agree with the idea of land that should be subject to development, although in order to determine its use they would be more likely to employ the expression, “the right kind of re-zoning”. A planning expert, by the term territory, would instead be referring to a neutral space or “system” composed of nodes connected by “networks and flows”. For the strategists of green capitalism the territory is above all a source of energy resources and the basis for the sustainable development of the autonomous economy based on macro-infrastructures, while for their ecologist collaborators it is a complex of ecosystems whose preservation necessitates the search for a juridical-political formula that would make this preservation compatible with its exploitation, that is, with the social rule of the commodity. We therefore find ourselves presented with something like the idea of “environment”, dissimulated with scientific or technical jargon. The definition of “territory” is thus from the start contaminated by the economic-political interests that hide behind it, and which in general tend to reduce it to a physical space, geographic vacuum, foundation, epidermis, landscape, external world, and, finally, as what the sociologist Marc Augé called it, a “non-place”—although it could also be called a “stage set” or “stage scenery”—that is, a portion of space without any real identity and without inhabitants, where every stay is provisional because within it everyone is either a pedestrian or a shopper, and exhibits a codified and controlled behavior. From this point of view, the territory is the opposite of the “city”, a purely formal opposition, since the planned

or uncontrolled spread of the urban conglomerations that improperly bear that name tends to merge both extremes. Currently, what is called the “city” is only a populated “non-place”. Ultimately, amidst the full flowering of urbanized society, without any clear discontinuity between the urban area and its environs, the territory as seen by a manager cannot be anything but the peri-urban by confusing it with the urban in the same economic space, that is, in a vast factory, which as such is only opposed to the masses that occupy it. This is not what it used to be, but what it has become.

In the interest of a comprehensive understanding of the term we will have to go beyond the contingent interests that are based on petrified determinations and proceed directly to the contradiction in its changing concrete existence. Territory is space defined in and by time, or, to put it another way, it is a social and historical fact. Paraphrasing Hegel we shall say that it embraces not just the *substance* (nature as abstract totality) but also the *subject* (humanity as transformative agent), forming a dynamic unity of both. Its concept has been linked since the beginning with that of *civitas*, which constitutes its nexus, rather than with that of the *habitat*. In classical Greece the *polis* included the surrounding land as well as the city. Cleisthenes divided the Athenian *polis* into *demes*, territorial units or villages whose members were *demotes*, citizens. The *territorium*, according to Roman law, was the zone of influence of a political community, “a group of men united by law” (Cicero). In the strict sense, its meaning was similar to that of the Roman municipality, but without thereby ceasing to be a sacred space: the king Numa Pompilius established the worship of the god Terminus [the god of property boundaries] after a distribution of land. The *ager* or farmland and the *saltus* or uncultivated land, together with the *populus*, the population, and the *urbs*, the urban precinct, constituted the city properly speaking. In the least strict sense, it meant something like the *hinterland* [in English in original—translator’s note], its area of cultural and economic influence. For more extensive spaces that were the objects of administration and government they preferred to use the word *regio*, region, derived from *regere*, which at first meant to trace a straight line, from which in turn the words rule, royal, rector, and also regicide, rectify, insurrection, also derive.... In the 7th century, by which time the Roman municipalities had literally disappeared, the word “territory” only referred to a piece of land worked by the plow and bounded by ditches (Saint Isadore, *Etymologies*), but some trace of its past meaning was retained in the boundaries of the diocese. A new social structure, however, that was the product and the cause of the movement of peasants who colonized former waste lands, the village community, based on the idea of the common territory rather than on that of a common origin, emerged during the High Middle Ages and was consolidated over the course of several centuries. In France the territory where the rural community was established was called the *finage*, and included the church, the houses, the roads, the fields and the forest. It was more or less the equivalent of the *terminus*, or even more of the “jurisdiction”, since it implicitly entailed the right of self-administration. In Catalonia it was called the *universitat*, in the Basque Country, the *anteiglesia* and in other Iberian regions, the *concejo*. When the European cities were once again flourishing in the 12th and 13th centuries, the word “territory” recovered its initial meaning of improved, farmed or vacant land bounded by markers, including a city or a villa, a “place that is enclosed within walls, with its suburban areas and the buildings contained within them”, to whose jurisdiction it was subject (*Las Siete Partidas*, Alfonso X). In Castile, in order to define the formal boundaries of the city the word “*alfoz*” was preferentially used, derived from the Arab *alfohoz*; in France, *banlieue* or *districtus*, and in Italy, *contado*; but the most usual expression of the idea of the territory was that of the “community of the villa and the land”, a formula used to

describe the newly-settled lands in Castile and Aragon. The territory is not therefore just plain space, but the space of man, nature transformed by human activity; culture originally meant nature transformed by human labor and “cultivate” has the same root. It is the space of culture and of history; a social space because it contains, reproduces and develops social relations. And it is also a natural space. Reclus, in *L’Homme et la Terre*, discussing the harmony with the environment exhibited by indigenous communities, asks: “Can we not say that man is nature become conscious of itself?” Marx called nature “man’s inorganic body”, meaning that the human species cannot be conceived without the nature of which it forms a part and with which it maintains a special “metabolism”. The territory is the setting of this metabolism.

We know that rule over the forces of nature did not liberate human beings, but instead this rule was converted into diverse forms of social oppression that could be controlled wherever the historical dynamism was most highly developed, and where the subject, the social being, could at least in part emancipate himself from the object, from nature: this was a peculiar type of walled settlement, that is, the *burg*, *villa* or *faubourg*, that is, the medieval city, a self-governing community, held together by an oath (*conjuratio*), which could not exist without the surpluses of the surrounding villages. Their distinctive sign was the gate [the “port”—Old English, from the Latin *porta*, “gate”—American translator’s note], through which the city communicated with the territory and the world. It is proverbial, however, that no such gates could be built in the countryside. The city was the cradle of liberty and democracy, writing and the arts, justice and law, science and rational thought ... but it was also the place where bureaucracy, tyranny, wage labor, classes and money were born. As they developed and extended their influence, the cities absorbed people, energy and wealth, becoming socially stratified and undergoing a concentration of power, which disturbed their internal equilibrium (the medieval cities were in constant turmoil). In their arrogance they conquered the surrounding rural areas that they had previously helped liberate, causing frequent *jacqueries*. The peasants began to create their own separate institutions. In some areas they fled to place themselves under the rule of the cities on their own initiative. *Plebs semper in deterius prona est* (“The people are always prone to the worst”), said the Archbishop of Maguncia in 1127 when he was told that the peasants refused to pay the tithe. The egalitarian dream was very much a part of the heretical movements, the wars of religion and the peasant *furores*. The peasants, liberated from feudal domination and expressing themselves in the language of religion, immediately set out to realize the earthly paradise. In the countryside there was therefore no lack of historical experience, and neither art, nor freedom, nor even insurrections were foreign to its inhabitants, but the time of the peasantry passed more slowly, favoring the collectivity over the individual, subsistence over private profit, tradition over adventure, morality over economics, and custom over the market. It was a space that was intensively ordered by usages sanctioned by immemorial practice. While the city could be described as a *gesellschaft*, in the meaning given to the word by Ferdinand Toënnies, who defined it as an “association”, an aggregate in which the individual interest predominates, deriving from an instrumental or “arbitrary will” the cohesion of an order regulated in its smallest detail, the countryside may be understood as a *gemeinschaft*, a “community”, which is ruled by a single interest common to all, and where order, inscribed in memory, flows from the “essential will”, naturally, by custom (*Community and Society*). In both cases, although each in a different way, the individual interest coincides with the collective interest, or, which amounts to the same thing, with reason, although in the one case they are kept separate despite the factors that make them coincide and in the other they are indistinguishable despite the factors that tend to separate them. If, as Spinoza says, “he alone is free who lives

with free consent under the entire guidance of reason” (*Political Treatise*), one may conclude that common need guided the free peasant and common desire guided the city dweller. Two distinct forms of reason, one organic and the other economic, one based on mutual understanding and consensus, the other on the contract and the business deal. In the countryside, customary rules prevented the split between the public and the private domain that was characteristic of Roman law; prestige prevailed over property, rootedness over uprooting, stability over movement and, finally, household economy over the market. None of these traits, however, rendered the rural community safe from the separate powers that history had produced: on the one hand, the Church, the feudal lords and the landowners, and on the other the parasitic cities and the state. Rural society was never a “frozen society”, profound and immutable, at the margins of events. It often played an outstanding part in events: as Debord correctly pointed out, “the great European peasant revolts were also an attempt to *respond to history...*” (*Society of the Spectacle*). The decline of the rural community was slow but inexorable: the intrusion of the central authority through unappealable burdens and decrees, the excessive taxes of a wide variety of types, the loss of rights and, above all, the usurpation of the common lands by powerful individuals and lords, caused the divorce between the rural population and the territory (between the “*finage*” and the “*village*”), and between the territory and the city. The flight of the impoverished peasants was the necessary outcome of this. A cruel punitive system that subjected fugitive vagabonds who ran away from the domains of their English lords to hanging in batches of a hundred at a time, would eventually culminate in the 16th century in the genocidal process of enclosures and the destruction of the commons, since it seems that, faced with the alternative of joining the labor market or becoming beggars or thieves, the peasants inclined towards the latter option. Even in his forced uprooting, the free man still preserved his dignity. The practice of hastily dispatching by the most direct route those uprooted people who were considered to be a threat to society did not diminish in frequency until the shortage of labor power forced the exploitation of the cheap labor of inmates of workhouses and prisons. Two hundred years later, the proposals of the Physiocrats of the Enlightenment, who sought to resolve the agrarian problem without violence while simultaneously increasing state revenue, could be summarized as the creation of a class of peasant landowners, a goal that was hardly capable of being realized by means of the *emphyteusis* or laws restricting inheritance, but was perfectly possible with the division of the land resulting from the violent disappearance of the aristocracy, something that happened only in France. The end of the *Ancien Régime* and the political victory of the bourgeois heirs of the Enlightenment in the 19th century did not solve the problem, however. Privatization and industrialization only made it worse, and the essentially urban working class movement was not sufficiently aware of the agrarian question. The class struggle did not pay enough attention to agrarian affairs. Capitalist private property had definitively seized the territory, which had become a productive force, from the individual, breaking the organic bonds that united the individual with the territory and preparing the ground for the rule of the commodity. In short, it transformed him into either a property owner or a proletarian. Nature, countryside, town, city, territory, over the course of the same historical process of alienation, all became reified entities, separated and distinct, and foreign to each other.

II. Fragmentation

Regardless of the vicissitudes of the different stages of accumulation or avatars of the free market, there can be no doubt that capitalism was an urban phenomenon and that its expansion proceeded in parallel with urbanization, obviously at the expense of the territory. The cities gave birth to a class associated with commerce and industry, the bourgeoisie, under whose leadership the definitive “metabolic rupture” took place between urban society and the primary source of wealth: the land (the other is labor). Capitalist production was imposed in the countryside in alliance with the landed nobility, exploiting it just as it exploited the workers. From an economic perspective, all agricultural progress was progress against the countryside itself since it was carried out under capitalist conditions; “the complete *separation of the producer from the means of production*” (*Capital*), which was responsible for the appearance of the “day laborer”, entailed the subsidiary effect of a complete and irreparable separation between the city and the territory, the source of irresolvable evils insofar as the latter was only viewed as a source of capital. The “progress” of the liberal ideologists meant the expropriation of the peasants, the pillaging of communal property, the cutting down of the forests, draining of the swamps and the consolidation of a class of large-scale agricultural landowners. Inalienable property based on the family patrimony was replaced by alienable property based on the exploitation of the labor of others. The principal effect of capitalist production was to extend “the separation between labor and property, labor and the objective conditions of labor”. Subsequently, “capital destroys artisan labor, small working landownership, etc., and also itself in those forms in which it does *not* appear in contradiction to labor: *petty capital*, and intermediate or hybrid types between the classic, adequate mode of production of capital itself, and the old modes of production (in their original form)” (Marx, *Grundrisse*). The circle was closed: human activity had engendered forces that escaped all control and oppressed society. The historical world had proved to be a dehumanized world that was opaque to reason, abolishing and recreating itself constantly on increasingly more oppressive foundations for a new social order. Spatially, this oppression was manifested in the dismantling of an old urban structure and its replacement by a new one that was much more aggressive. The new city oligarchies were less greedy for the rental income from the land than they were for its surplus population. By redefining the city that resulted from the evil known as the “industrial revolution” as completely in opposition to the rural world, whose population it engulfed, the very concept of the territory was obscured, its scope was diminished and its domain was relegated to the non-urban area. It became more like what the Romans called the *suburbia*, a place outside the walls, a disarticulated and vaguely bounded place, without any precise order or regulated function, where dirty and noisy activities were located, but one that was also susceptible to possessing exchange value that could make it attractive. It is certainly the case that a “proto-industrialization” took place in the countryside once domestic labor and production began to spread from the beginning of the 18th century, and it was there that the first factories were built, which became the targets of the luddite revolts.

The territory remained at the mercy of mainly urban forces that resolved their differences at markets and exchanges, rather than in open spaces and fields. During the first phases of capitalism, when the countryside was still a long way from its current condition of abandonment and destruction, and when the majority of the population was still located in rural areas, the agrarian problem was by far the greatest concern of social reformers, who produced a copious literature on this topic. Since it was, however, almost a dogmatic postulate of Marx that the redemptive

class of humanity was the proletariat, an urban class, it was concluded that the solution of the agrarian problem would take place in the cities, after the working class had seized control of the means of production and fulfilled the task that the bourgeoisie had been incapable of carrying out, that is, the further development of the productive forces. This development, however, would have disastrous consequences in the countryside for, by imitating the bourgeois productivist model, it provoked such intolerable poverty that it forced the peasants to flee their villages to the gates of the factories in search of work. Not without a certain ingenuousness, the socialist Vera Zasulich asked Marx how many centuries it would take for the dissolving function of the bourgeoisie to reach its conclusion in the countryside, the unequivocal sign of the beginning of the socialist revolution, in a Russia that was so backward that the village commune, the *mir*, still existed there. Marx responded briefly that the *mir* was “the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia” (letter of March 8, 1881), but he explained this idea in more depth in some preparatory notes he wrote before responding to Zasulich’s letter. The annihilation of the rural commune for the purpose of creating a prosperous peasant minority and a proletarian mass was not historically inevitable; if “at the time of emancipation” it receives assistance in order to “detach itself from its primitive features” it could be “an element of collective production on a nationwide scale”. Marx, who was influenced with regard to this issue by the historian Maurer, said that “the vitality of primitive communities was incomparably greater than that of Semitic, Greek, Roman, etc. societies, and, *a fortiori*, that of modern capitalist societies”; furthermore, “the new commune introduced by the Germanic peoples in all the countries they invaded was the sole centre of popular liberty and life throughout the Middle Ages” (“First Draft of the Letter to Zasulich”) Naturally, all over Europe the remnants of this rural community were preserved in the form of rights of common use and exploitation of pastures, wastelands, springs, peat bogs and forests, which rights were known in Switzerland and in Germany as *allmende* and in England as the *commons*, and place names recall the *thing*, the assembly of free German men presided over by a judge or *langman*, but only in Russia did this community survive, which allowed for an original approach to solving the capitalist crisis, one favoring the gradual transformation of “individualist farming in parcels directly and gradually into collective farming” and facilitating the “the transition from parcel labour to cooperative labour”. Marx suggested that, in order to coordinate the efforts of the communes, it would be necessary to create an assembly of peasant delegates elected in the communities, but everything depended on a few radical changes whose primary agent was the proletariat: “To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is needed.”

Kropotkin went much further by proclaiming, in his *Mutual Aid*, the “territorial” principle of the village commune and the mutual aid agreements between the medieval cities as the historical foundations for a free society. In particular, the rural municipality, of which many vestiges still remained, was for him “the primary cell of future organization”. He did not, however, defend this institution in the form in which it existed in his time: “On a sufficiently large territory, not within the bounds of a single town we must someday begin to put in practice the Communism of the future” (“Communism and Anarchy”, 1901). The road to libertarian communism, however, was not very clearly demarcated in the work of the rebel prince, who placed too much confidence in social evolution itself and foresaw the creation of a constantly increasing number of free associations in order to address problems that the state was incapable of solving. Most varieties of anarchist thought adopted his communist ideal, but not his Darwinian optimism. This turn towards the past in search of inspiration was also practiced by other authors, such as William Morris and Gustav Landauer, for example. The latter insisted just as much or even more than

Kropotkin on pre-capitalist communities as “the seeds and living crystals of the coming socialist culture”. The period of the medieval *gemeinschaft* was not a Golden Age to which we must return, but a mine of useful autonomous experiences for the reconstruction of a stateless society. The means provided by modernity are not entirely scorned, although both these authors noted all the reasons to be cautious about the idea of progress, of which Landauer was very critical.

Only in Spain was the traditional rural community considered to be an immediate response to the agrarian problem, the burning question of the rural areas of the time, but not by the anarchists. In this country there was still a tradition of enlightened reformism that culminated in the social liberalism of the erudite and politically “regenerationist” Joaquín Costa. A consistent theme of agrarian social thought was the subordination of landed property to the general interest, advocating rural development that would keep the masses in the countryside by way of old formulas of possession and usufruct like *emphyteusis*, the *censo* and the leasehold, thus preventing their impoverishment and proletarianization. In this conception the state was called upon to be the motor force of change, which is why this reform required the nationalization of the land, but the tragedy of the reformers was the fact that state power was in the hands of a minority of *caciques* whose interests were totally contrary to their proposals. Costa was the only reformer who, at the end of his life, after having been convinced of the uselessness of the attempts to change the liberal oligarchic and despotic state “from above”, appealed to a “revolution from below”. In an important book published in 1898, *Colectivismo agrario en España*, Costa, almost in the manner of Kropotkin, studied the rich tradition of peasant institutions manifested by abundant remains, forms of settlement and cooperation, the councils, private and common goods, resettled and fallow lands, reallocations, communal irrigation, fisheries, guilds and brotherhoods, work projects of associated neighbors (*auzolan*, *andecha*, *sestaferia*)... Between the 11th and 13th centuries the Iberian municipality was a public entity with autonomous jurisdiction and administration, governed by the *concilium*, the “*junta*” or assembly of all the neighbors, who deliberated concerning collective interests, particularly with regard to the use of communal goods, rendered justice and even mobilized for defense. The conciliar organization was a political system that emanated from the *común*, the common people, a system that was perverted by the increasing power of the oligarchs and the “regimental” system until it disappeared in the cities during the 16th century, but which continued to exist for a long time in the rural small towns. Based on these discoveries, Costa elaborated a collectivist strategy that aspired to break with the rule of the landowning oligarchy: he called for the repeal of the laws allowing seizure of the land and other assets of debtors, authorization of the municipalities to acquire or lease land for the purpose of distributing it among the impoverished farmers, day-laborers and even craftsmen and industrial workers, rehabilitation of the patrimony of the *concejo* even if this would require forced expropriation, resumption of collectivist practices, revitalization of customary rights, etc. Costa claimed that the most important social problem was the agrarian question, which was not such a crazy idea in a country that was predominantly rural, and he was not afraid to write that everything depended on the downfall of the monarchist and *cacique*-ridden state. Indeed, that day was not so remote; and Spanish anarchism, characterized by its adoption of the territorial principle of the federation of independent municipalities as the key to libertarian social reorganization, never forgot its precursors and always acknowledged their legacy: the collectivization measures of the Spanish revolution of 1936–1937 cannot be understood without acknowledging the imprint of that age-old tradition that some have confused with millenarianism, a tradition blazed in red in the historical consciousness of the industrial workers and day laborers in the trade unions, that

historical tradition that Costa placed so much emphasis on as the indisputable basis for a free and emancipated society.

III. Planning

Capital, based on technological innovations, impresses upon the city a rate of growth that exceeds the limits imposed by the availability of water, energy and food, necessitating the construction of hydraulic, energy, transport and waste disposal infrastructures. The modern ruling class did not originate exclusively in industry and commerce; it largely evolved in relation with real estate development and the construction or operation of basic infrastructures. The industrial city was not a compact settlement because there was nothing to limit its growth; thanks to the employment of machinery, the intensive consumption of energy, an imposing bureaucratic apparatus and the new means of transport, it inexorably expanded and spread over the surrounding areas, configuring a radically different spatial morphology, articulated by superior structures of mechanical mobility. Class society is an urban society, not a society of cities [*sociedad ciudadana*, could also mean “civil society”—American translator’s note]. On the threshold of the 20th century, the logic of concentration had produced an urban civilization without any real cities: in the almost depopulated downtowns all power was concentrated into the hands of an industrial, financial and construction elite, surrounded by increasingly larger suburban zones populated by masses of wage laborers. Some sociologists speak of the “diffuse city”, the “metacity” or the “post-city”, but for Lewis Mumford it is a veritable “anti-city”: “the diluted and homogenized environment of the anti-city”, as he referred to it in *The Urban Prospect* (1956). This city is a product of the decomposition of urban reality, which had already commenced with the appearance of the modern state, a mass of fragments uprooted from their original environment and dispersed throughout the surroundings, without any public life, without normal communication; a ruined space where a mass-produced and standardized population is precariously installed. Patrick Geddes, who observed the birth of this phenomenon in the British mining districts, designated by the name of *conurbation* this type of population center that was only suitable for a life reduced to the minimum, motorized and confined for most of the time to enclosed spaces (*Cities in Evolution*).

The relation between city and territory degenerated to an inconceivable extent as new technologies were invented and put to use; the urban environment invaded and dehumanized all social space by warehousing a population without any autonomy in pathogenic apartment blocks, destroying arable land and degrading or banalizing the countryside: the territory was nothing but the suburban space that resulted from the barbarous new model of human settlement. Urban chaos reached such extremes that the leading elements of the industrial cities were compelled to advocate a certain degree of organization of their network of buildings, leading to the science of the space of the economy, urbanism. The mutilation and degradation of the territory that resulted from the process of urban expansion gave birth to the proposals for systematic “regional planning” advocated by Geddes, which were endorsed by the Regional Planning Association of America, founded in 1923 by Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein and Benton MacKaye. The reformists of this Association wanted to engender an intense, pleasant and creative way of life based on regional balance, for which purpose they proposed local agriculture, decentralization of energy production, the de-congestion of the metropolis and a balanced distribution of the population in well-equipped and interconnected living units. Regional planning was conceived

to eliminate the excesses of overpopulation and the general waste of energy, food and consumer goods, in order to reduce and isolate long distance transport and to relocate industries near the sources of their raw materials. The starting point was no longer the “Dinosaur City”, but the region defined in the following way: “... a region being any geographical area that possesses a certain unity of climate, soil, vegetation, industry and culture. The regionalist attempts to plan such an area so that all its sites and resources, from forest to city, from highland to water level, may be soundly developed, and so that the population will be distributed so as to utilize, rather than to nullify or destroy, its natural advantages” (Mumford, “Regions—To Live In”, *Survey*, May 1, 1925). What is immediately striking about this proposal is the idealism of the intellectuals who were committed to building “levees against the metropolitan flood”, an idealism that was destined to be shipwrecked in the ocean of economic interests and the bureaucratic labyrinths of municipal governments, although it was designed to serve those same interests. The theme of regional planning was once again taken up by the International Congress for Modern Architecture (ICMA), but in this case its purpose was inverted, that is, it attempted to reconcile the reforms associated with regional planning with the powerful interests that rule the world. In its *Athens Charter* (1933), the ICMA defined regional planning as the totality that encompassed “a plan for the total economic unit—the city-region...” It insisted on criticizing that “agglomeration of hutments” called the suburb, “a type of scum” that churns against the walls of the city and that over the course of the previous decades had “become an ocean and then a tidal wave”, which is why, in order to assure a new equilibrium, or, rather, to consolidate the existing disequilibrium, planning must not separate the “city” from the “region”, that is, from the territory. The functionalist architects spoke in the name of the general interests of capitalism: they accepted the fact that the conditioning or domestication of the territory was therefore an economic consequence of planning for urban expansion; they just opted for verticalization, that is, for an intensive occupation of the territory, inaugurating the construction of the high-rise apartment blocks for the poor that were typical of the postwar era. These plans, however, were incapable of counteracting the effects of the permissive laws governing real property, which openly favored the very concrete interests of the landowners and speculators. The private profits of the real estate industry trumped any rationalization of urban growth, and “regulatory” planning was not carried out until after the 1950s, when the automobile and concrete had already provided a major impetus to the suburbanization of the territory and the pro-development interests took control of urban policy. The conurbation constantly required more land and more motorization. The sanitary zoning that was so insisted on by the architects of the ICMA, that is, the establishment of larger and larger distances between the places of leisure, consumption, residence and work, with a few “green belts” interspersed among them—this had nothing to do with the agricultural belt recommended by the Association for Regional Planning—combined with deficient public transport, increasingly more sordid living conditions and cheap credit, drove the masses to the private vehicle, multiplied the number of highways and freeways and as a result exponentially increased mobility, the demand for energy and disorder. The process that was thus unleashed was not simply a matter of the dispersion of buildings—of the spread of residential space—but of generalized urbanization; it was purely and simply the absorption of the territory, which was ultimately covered by an undifferentiated urban fabric. The habitat, defined by Le Corbusier as “a machine for living in”, was not otherwise economically viable. The extensively urbanized space was for the most part transformed into a space for the circulation of vehicles. The highways would design the territory and determine its articulation. Despite the priority of private profit, the formation of the

“megalopolis” and “city-regions”, black holes that absorbed all the space, the common patrimony and the vitality that still existed, required some kind of regulation of the extra-urban residential development projects and industrial complexes, regulation that went by the name of “regional planning” and which was an extension of the already-existing urban planning. The Spanish legislation regarding Regional Planning, which was written by engineers and architects, claimed to be a scientific measure whose function was to confer a legal framework for the activity of “economic agents”, that is, the real estate developers, industrialists and speculators, but was in fact intended to legalize their activity by authorizing their arbitrariness and their excesses. In reality it was nothing but a scientific disguise for the promotion of the real estate industry. This legislation sought above all to make the territory accessible, to facilitate its “connectivity”, and therefore the multiplication of infrastructures. The territory was subordinated to the infrastructures instead of the latter being adapted to the territory. The infrastructures condition and even determine all land use: tourism, farming, highways, bedroom communities, leisure, garbage dumps, prisons, energy production.... And where there are highways, there are always real estate developers and speculators. The regulations elaborated to justify this “culture of the highway” under the pretext of “regional development”, “economies of scale”, “job creation”, and a larger tax base, are known as “regional planning”. This consists in a consecration of the prevailing disorder at a qualitatively higher level of deterioration, since for the leaders it had nothing to do with controlling or protecting anything, but of “connecting” and “dynamizing”, that is, of creating the optimal conditions for speculative growth that will generate huge short-term profits. The “planning” was the contribution of the government officials, urbanist technicians and public institutions to the destruction of the territory, the policy framework for its complete transformation into capital.

Fifty years after the *Athens Charter*, when the financial-construction corporations had become much more powerful, the conference of ministers responsible for regional planning, held on May 25, 1983 at Torremolinos of all places—a location that is emblematic of the uncontrolled destruction of the seaboard regions—set forth its goals in a *European Regional/Spatial Planning Charter*, which goals are defined as giving “geographical expression to the economic, social, cultural and ecological policies of society”, or, in a nutshell, the expression of the geographical model of the corporate developmentalism of the multinationals. This was a much more serious attempt to plan the systematic exploitation of the territory. At that time, one began to notice the results of the technological changes of the post-war era due to the race for productivity gains. The urban environment, proceeding along a linear path of growth, clashed head-on with the territory, obstructing its cyclic processes. The innovations that affected agriculture (mainly the massive use of fertilizers and pesticides) and transportation (the more powerful automobiles and the replacement of the railroad by the tractor trailer), together with the exponential increase in energy production and the explosive growth of the petrochemical industry, were the causes of unimaginable misfortunes. The real crisis was exacerbated: the depopulation of the countryside, the accumulation of wastes, pollution, the depletion of energy resources, the hole in the ozone layer, global warming, climate change ... were its first manifestations. The environmental movement degenerated into “green” parties and has clambered aboard the bandwagon of developmentalism and politics. As a result of the statization of environmentalism, the state has been environmentalized, and has gone so far as to admit that the “profound changes” brought about in civil society by capitalism required “a critical review of the principles governing the organization of space, to avoid their being wholly determined by short-term economic objectives” in order to proceed to a “systematic implementation of plans for land use” that would lay the basis

for a “rational use of land”. This does not succeed in dissimulating the fact that the phraseology of “well-being”, “balanced regional development”, “quality of life” and “interaction with the environment” marked the passage to a mass society, where the territory was not primarily a source of food but a capital-space organized for its detailed consumption. And the preferred form of consumption came from the industrialization of leisure by the way of the second residence and tourism. The territory was not, however, merely a reserve of urbanizable land, since in the exploitation of its resources interests were being nurtured that would join those of the real estate sector and the major infrastructures. From that point on there was a flood of “regulatory” laws and regional plans, but the insatiable demand for land, the political conditions and the crises—“the variability of the economic conjuncture”, as an expert said—rendered their generalized application impossible. After the United Nations Brundtland Report, however, the executives that made the economic decisions, faced with the problem of future energy shortages, became aware of the “green” dimension of capitalism: from now on, development will be sustainable or it will not take place. For more precision this was defined at the “Earth Summit” at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 as the unity of the environment with the globalized economy adopting the form of “natural capital”. The territory became “a new dimension” in high-level policy, being situated at the heart of the society-economy-environment triangle. Its “structuring” became a priority as the “periphery” of a series of core nuclei with which it would be necessary to be connected by means of proposed new infrastructures. With this type of decentralization its competitiveness would be “maximized”—raising its “value” as an “asset” to the maximum—and “economic, social and territorial cohesion” would be reinforced, correcting the serious imbalances that caused inequalities in economic potential with respect to the metropolitan areas, those “laboratories of the world economy” and “motors of progress”. In the Spanish state regional planning is the responsibility of the intermediate bureaucratic layers, which include the autonomous communities, and this resulted in plans that were exaggeratedly pro-development, whose “sustainability” was “overseen” by committees composed of financial executives, entrepreneurs and the politicians from the areas in question. The European leaders, who set forth their objectives in a document from 1999 entitled *European Spatial Development Perspective*,² sought the integration of even the most remote parts of the territory in the world economy, restoring economic activity in them thanks to access to the “Trans-European Networks” of transport, telecommunications and energy, that is, by means of the constitution of an integrated European market in construction, distribution, mass tourism and gas and electricity. Funds for restructuring, plans for local development, environmental legislation, productivism and total computerization: these are the components of the “new model of polycentric development”. By way of mechanisms of tele-participation and public-private partnerships a “new culture of the territory” will be inaugurated that dissimulates as much as possible the insuperable contradiction between the natural processes that really govern the territory and the industrial processes that structure globalized society. Or, to put it another way: they are trying to put out the fire by burning a different kind of wood.

IV. Defense

In the current stage of capitalist growth, that of its global development, the territory has become not only the base of the infrastructures and the most solid pillar of urbanization but, more generally, it has become the principal exploitable resource and the indispensable motor of eco-

conomic activity. In a tertiarized economy, with hardly any agriculture activity, it is discovered that territory-capital disputes with city-capital for the leading position as the dominant form of capital. The accumulation of capital has become dispersed and the territory is now the main element of a diffuse fabric and at the same time the endpoint of the process of the industrialization of life. In parallel with this development, the territory as capital must be controlled and secured in consonance with its newly-acquired strategic importance. But precisely due to its new functions, the territory has become for the capitalist system the contradiction that contains all the others: on the one hand, its destruction as a finite resource will prevent an exploitation that claims to be infinite, thus endangering the foundations of the economy; and on the other hand, its destruction as the complete artificialization of the social space where the harmful effects of a pernicious developmentalism accumulate, will inflict such abominable conditions on the survival of the species that the latter will find it hard to endure. The energy crisis is an example of the first contradiction; the spontaneous revolts of the metropolitan suburbs of the world, an example of the second. Moreover, the destruction of the territory is not avoidable in the current context: given that the preponderant productive force, technology, is an eminently destructive force, catastrophe is the result of as well as the precondition for the functioning of contemporary capitalism. Catastrophes lead to greater controls, technical solutions where they can be applied, so the destruction of the territory does not shrink from its consequences, but imposes monitoring, which the “greens” call “tracking”, the police experts call “containment” and the leaders, simply “maintaining order”. These controls are intended to obtain both the adaptation of the population to devastation as well as the channeling and dissipation of protest. For the former purpose, there will be more environmental legislation and media campaigns, providing a framework for civil society platforms, political environmentalism and volunteerism. For the latter objective, they will devote their resources directly to technological surveillance and the forces of order. These are the two poles whose only task is to neutralize the most exemplary of all anti-capitalist struggles: the defense of the territory. The capitalist dialectic of destruction and reconstruction is reproduced in the dialectic of repression and integration.

The territory, by being converted into the main part of a dispersed factory, becomes the place where social antagonisms can be expressed in all their magnitude, and thus the social question can be presented as the territorial question. In Castile, “the defense of the territory” as defense of common property against the usurpation of the nobles is mentioned in the 15th century, but the general use of the expression is much more recent; it probably originated in the Latin American peasant struggles of the 1970s and 1980s in defense of their environments and culture against agribusiness, strip mining and the construction of dams. As opposed to a territory stripped bare by illegitimate economic interests, the communities conceived the idea of the territory as a common good for regulated collective use, a haven, resource and source of life. In those countries dominated by turbo-capitalist conditions, the defense of territory arises in the countryside in the form of activities to protect the rural habitat and the lifestyle the latter makes possible, and in the conurbation as a response to the unbearable degradation of urban life. In both cases it is a defense of their lost identity, the identity concerning which Cato the Censor speaks in his *De Agricultura*: “And when they would praise a worthy man their praise took this form: ‘good husbandman, good farmer’” (the Romans considered agriculture as the only occupation suitable for a really free man). In the countryside there is ongoing resistance to infrastructure projects and the industrialization of agriculture, a resistance that seeks to restore local democracy; in the urban center it is a struggle for the decolonization of public life, or it takes the form of the desertion of

the city. In the first case it appeals to the support of the urban masses; in the second, it issues a call from the public square to occupy land and create collective gardens. The defense of territory is therefore a struggle for the city, and vice-versa, the struggle for the city is a defense of the territory. There was a time when the urban population had a major agrarian component, represented in its leading institutions. City and territory never were nor are they now distinct and opposed realities, they are interdependent; they cannot be conceived in isolation from each other, nor can they be transformed separately. Civil liberty will never exist in a subjugated territory, nor will municipal sovereignty ever be able to exist in the context of the megalopolis. So that there can be a real symbiosis, the two require the dismantling of the conurbations and the dispersion of power, but not the abolition of the city; the recovery for cultivation of the urbanized space and the end of unilateral dependence, is not the goal of the collective project of the city dwellers: deindustrialization follows the steps towards ruralization, not those towards anti-civilized barbarism. To de-urbanize the countryside and ruralize the city, to return to the country and restore the city, such are the convergent lines of a future revolution. The right to territory which must be deduced from a rational use of space, is also the right to the city.

If we proclaim that the defense of the territory is the new class struggle, or that—we repeat—the social question is above all a territorial question, this is not because the goals of an oppressed class have shifted from the factories to agriculture, or to hunting and gathering. In a society where exploitation is basically technical, the oppressed do not form a class, since they are nothing but the prostheses of the machine, masses shaped in the image of the urban world in which they survive. They are not defined by their being paid a wage in exchange for their labor, but by the fact that they are cogs in a machine that forces them to consume and go into debt in a conditioned and cloistered space, that of the market economy. They are thus defined by a certain imposed way of life, where they lack all decision making power. This space is urban but without an urban life, ideal for neurotics, parasites, and abnormal and psychopathic individuals. It is the space of masses without voice or consciousness, unhappy, subjected to mechanical and authoritarian administration at the hands of professionals in regimentation. The decline of conviviality and the rise in aggression that characterize it are both produced by the morbid factors that are provoked by overcrowding, living at the pace of machinery, consumerist stress, the lack of communication, and loneliness. Patrick Geddes called the degenerated metropolis the *pathopolis*, the city of sickness, and urban life is indeed being undermined by rapidly spreading pathological conditions. The violence of the urban revolts reflects the enormous violence that is endured on a daily basis by the demoralized inhabitants of the conurbations. It is not class violence, but the violence of the *déclassé*. The latent insurrection of the masses is nothing but the violently logical expression of the pathology of a privatized, mediocre, apathetic and enslaved life. The misery of everyday life, accentuated by crises, is the common denominator of all urban disturbances, from those of the American cities during the 1960s to the most recent outbreaks of urban violence in Stockholm, Ankara or Sao Paulo, and it is the substrate of all revolts. The new proletariat makes its debut through them. Nor is it in labor questions that we must seek the basis upon which we can reconstitute the subject of history, the unification of the object (the objective reality) with the subject (the agent of Reason), because this subject is what lies behind the protest against the total expropriation of life. This is a protest that implicitly contains the rejection of a reified and mass-produced space ruled by amnesia, the absence of connections and submission; in short, the rejection of the metropolitan habitat. Therefore, the critique of everyday life in acts is the bearer of a critique of space: from the critique of the concentration urbanism of the leaders we arrive at

that of the domestication of the territory by acquiring along the road a social consciousness of space or, in other words, a territorial consciousness. The defense of the territory, which naturally takes the form of assemblies, is the moment of that consciousness. The community is manifested as meeting, as “junta”, not as an association, or as any kind of group that is susceptible to being institutionalized. In a certain way one could say that if oppression has acquired a spatial dimension by penetrating into every little corner of life, the struggle against it will have to do the same. In the heat of battle, the class of consciousness, the new proletariat, is constituted by creating and defending its space, which is its world and its object. Its habitat is the diffuse factory that must be de-industrialized and de-urbanized so it can manage it freely, and its organic instrument is the territorial community represented by the assembly.

If subjecting the territory to planning was the latest stage of the planning of life, that is, planned chaos, the first task of its defense will be to “unplan it”, that is, de-massify it, de-privatize it and lead it back towards anarchy, which, according to Reclus, “is the highest expression of order”. Territorial defense must wrestle with great contradictions. The first resides in the fact that the subject who has to wage this struggle is for the most part concentrated in the conurbations, the homeland of unconsciousness and oblivion, which is why it is more likely that processes of depopulation and repopulation will proceed at different rates and will be uncoordinated. Urbanism and regional planning, in order to render the liberating appropriation of land and the abandonment of overcrowded zones impossible, has raised immense obstacles against population redistribution. In addition to this hurdle, another is raised: the struggle based in the conurbation is primarily destructive, since little that is real and autonomous can be constructed in the sterile spaces of wage and consumerist slavery, whereas in the countryside the constructive aspect enjoys many more opportunities, since peasant culture easily reemerges on land that is separated from the market; these factors, in a context of an absence of social consciousness, favor the development of messianic and nihilist ideologies in the urbanized zones, and the development of civil society and back-to-the-land ideologies in the suburbanized zones, forms of false consciousness that cloud the mind and make individuals strangers to the life of freedom. Thus, in the metropolitan areas, the labor question will be acclaimed as the highest expression of the “class struggle”, while confrontation with the forces of order are often raised up on the altars of radicality and violence is transformed into an absolute value as the “poetry of revolt”. On the other hand, in the post-rural zones, legalist protectionism, participation in political parties and government administration, the environmental commitment of the businesses and the pseudo-altruistic economy will be considered to be panaceas of reversing economic growth and of a well-intentioned back-to-nature ideology. Everywhere, a community of struggle must be constructed in order to move forward, but just as we must not scorn the urban gardens, the cooperative workshops or the assemblyist methods in the name of the self-defense of demonstrations, we must not ignore either the occupation of abandoned or expropriated lands, or the sabotage of GMO crops, the machinery of the infrastructure or tourism. It is revolutionary to know how to make a loaf of bread, but it is also revolutionary to know how to make a barricade. Its segregation as well as its resistance do not have the goal of its isolated survival but the consolidation of community and the abolition of capitalism. The reestablishment of open council meetings, the creation of social “currency”, reducing the length of the circuits between production and consumption, or the recovery of the communal lands, should not be “alter-capitalist” paths and pretexts for inactivity or citizenism. Their purpose in the domain of the oikos is the production of use values, not exchange values. They are not the identifying symbols of the rural hipster ghetto, but distinct aspects of a single struggle, the

struggle for a territory emancipated from the commodity and the state, whose atmosphere will make everyone who breathes it free. They are elements of the greatest importance upon whose correct combination an effective strategy that can lead the forces of historical consciousness to victory will depend. Its elaboration is the task of the anti-developmental critique, which, unlike other types of critique, does not get bogged down in abstract theoretical generalizations nor does it assume a position of pure negativity or activist positivity, because, in a quite concrete way, it knows what it wants. That is why it does not try to catch the moon in its reflection on the water. It knows exactly where to look to find things.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Miguel Amorós
A Brief Explanation of the Concept of Territory and Its Implications
2013

Retrieved on 8th May 2021 from libcom.org
Notes for presentations at the *Biblioteca Social A Gavilla* (Santiago), the *CSO Palavea* (La Coruña), the *Ateneo Ecaixe* (Lugo) and *La Cova dos Ratos* (Vigo), on October 30 and 31 and November 1 and 4, 2013, respectively. Translated in December 2013-January 2014 from copy of Spanish text provided by author.

theanarchistlibrary.org