On Creatively Destructing

Capitalism—as Marx has showed and Schumpeter has reminded us—has always promoted creative destruction practices. What in fact helps capitalism survive is the constant renewal of its products, modes of production, and needs through its own self-destructiveness. Capitalist destruction is a clearing out, a maneuver, a revaluation, and the presupposition for creation, all at once. It is the unification, the embracing of multiple and seemingly incompatible activities whose common component mainly consists in positivity: in their ability to reverse, to beautify destruction and its products. In real space, capitalism's destructiveness gains its "literal meaning", interestingly involving into its analysis biological metaphors. It then presents itself as regeneration, as a natural, organic condition, and—in its purest manifestation—as life itself. At the antipode of capitalist creative destructions stands a destructive practice, negatively charged and described by a frightening name from allegory and history: "vandalism."

Key Words: Capitalism, Creative Destruction, Karl Marx, Self-Destruction, Vandalism

Destruction is a common practice encountered in every era. And, every era proceeds to a clear distinction between forms of destruction linked to creative practices and forms that seem to have neither specific cause nor target. In the modern era, however, this distinction between what is considered to be good, productive destruction and what is not has become even clearer. For, the distinction is exceptionally vital to capitalism, which claims for itself a very special type of destruction, preceded by the word "creative." To understand and identify the different conceptions of destruction and the relatively recent concept of "creative destruction"—and, to describe the ways in which the latter shrugs off destructions that are not considered to be linked with creation—has acquired increasing urgency (economic crises like ours, which are themselves states of urgency, have always been characterized by an excess of destructiveness). But because of its temporality and the fact that the distinction it suggests is still very powerful, to talk about "creative destruction," to draw and question its limits, seems a much more coherent task if it is accomplished (and presented) in an elliptical way: through the enumeration or listing of its aspects rather than through their exhaustive, consecutive adducing.

1.

"All epochs," wrote Lavedan (1952, 119), "have been vandals towards their elders … That every era wants to live its artistic life is simply natural. That it wants to live its very short life is much more natural. Living people have more rights than the dead ones, the animated beings than the stones, even those that have a soul." Indeed, every era devotes itself to a destructive practice (urgent or fictitious need remaining, still today, insusceptible to a commonly agreed definition or to historically consolidated criteria that would dictate its implementation). Perhaps the least controversial and most

central fact regarding destruction is that its projection onto the material world does not necessarily need to be physical. It is, instead, through acts on two fields, a real and a symbolic one, that the destruction (what is more commonly called "redefining") of things and the establishment of truth are achieved.

Walter Benjamin (1989, 330) once wrote, "The destructive character's only watchword is: Make room; his only activity: clearing out. His need for fresh air and free space is stronger than any hatred." So, destruction can be an act of mere dematerialization: turning "the walls or the mountains" (or even "the traces of destruction") into "fresh air," "free space," "pathways"—into a field of possibilities. But destruction is also conceived as the necessary and sufficient condition, as the indispensible foundation on which creation—artistic or not—will be based. From the Periclean Parthenon's construction on top of the former Doric temple's relics and the abstraction and subsequent reuse of classical heritage's spolia during the Byzantine era; to the fire that the archbishop of Reims was accused of igniting at the city's Carolingian cathedral (in order to build a new in its place); to Gabriel's destruction of the Ambassadors Staircase in Versailles, intending to wipe out Mansart's creation; in all these there can be traced a creative *angoisse*: someone endeavoring to live his "artistic life," as Lavedan put it.

2.

When destruction gets clearly linked to creation (as the act to be taken in order for creation to begin), it is raised to our culture's highest value levels, for no era has yet accepted a form of destruction that seems to have neither cause nor specific target. With the exception of its psychological interpretations—the function of which aims at the classification, normalization, and reinclusion of what has already been socially excluded—this latter form of destruction is also

unacceptable in the modern era.

The term that has claimed the authority to describe this destruction for us is "vandalism" (*vandalisme*). Created by the bishop of Blois, Henri Grégoire, to define the destruction of artwork following the French Revolution, it was used for the first time in 1794. in his report to the French Convention, where he declared in triumph: "Je créai le mot pour tuer la chose" (I created the word to kill the thing; quoted in Egaña 2005, 7).

"Vandalism" has since been described as the opposite of culture or, more than that, of civilization. In reverse, any destructive activities not stigmatized as such can be seen from then onward as cultural expressions, as deeds profoundly belonging to a righteous process of spiritual evolution. Because the modern interpretation of "vandalism," implemented selectively in administrative and formal discourse, instead of condemning destruction (in "all of its forms") rather sustains it and actively encourages those forms of destruction whose morality consists of the mere fact that they are not *called* "vandalisms." At the moment when "vandalism" comes into being, accompanied by the operational distinction into "good" and "evil" forms of destruction, the modern period of destruction begins. Destruction now gains the power to evaluate its products: nothing destroyed has, hereafter, the right to be called an artwork (or any kind of cultural monument) unless its destruction is called "vandalism."

Modernity's spiritual foundations lie also, one might think, in the famous Nietzschean quotations, "Whoever must be a creator always annihilates" (Nietzsche 2006, 43) and, "Whoever must be a creator in good and evil—truly, he must first be an annihilator and break values. Thus the highest evil belongs to the highest goodness, but this is the creative one" (90). Nietzsche's words, however, were to be invested in modernity into a wide range of dissimilar, mismatched instances (including colonization, bombings in the First World War, and the vast outburst of another war—

that against disease), all claiming their right to pure, nonvandalistic destruction and all put together under the same "creative" spirit. In an exemplary way, Le Corbusier—unanimously considered one of the most important architects of the modern era—asserted for himself the role of that kind of annihilator/creator in his "Plan Voisin," in which he happily proposed the eradication of a quite important part of Paris.[1] Expressing its objection, the city council resorted to the same operational distinction: they called him a barbarian (Le Corbusier 1967, 207).

3.

Perhaps contrary to what it is presented to be (that is, a highly productive system), capitalism, more than anything else, promotes and invests in destructive practices. Under capitalism, the accumulation of capital is strongly linked with its own annihilation. In the earliest and indeed most eloquent and substantial description of a process inherent to capitalism—that is, of its *self-destructiveness*—Marx and Engels (2002, 226) stressed:

> Industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce … And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.

It is ironic that this basic insight about capitalist processes was to be established through Austrian-

American economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter (who cannot in any way be considered a Marxist)[2] in his work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, published in 1942. In the book's seventh chapter, on capitalism, one finds the now famous analysis dealing with capitalism's "process of creative destruction." "Let us reiterate," proposes Schumpeter in a forceful, hectic critique of his contemporaries' analyses of capitalism (including those of many Marxists), that capitalism constitutes "by nature a form or a method of economic change and not only never is, but never can be stationary" (82). "We are concerned," he says, with the ways in which capitalism manages existing structures and with the question of their incessant creation and destruction. This process is inherent in capitalism, since capitalism incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure "from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one" (82–3). This is, by Schumpeter's recognition, what Marx (1993, 750) argued perhaps most clearly in the *Grundrisse*: "The violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation."

4.

Of course, creation and destruction can be seen as connected in a pleiad of ways. First is the indisputable fact that destruction presupposes creation: something can be destroyed only if it has first been created (be it in the symbolic or the material word); one cannot destroy nothingness. Another connection comes when both creation and destruction are perceived as interpretations. Every truth's function is to suppress, and as much as creation can stand on an older creation (thus *covering up*, thus destroying, thus becoming interpretation), destruction—metaphorized as truth—*uncovers* interpretations (thus opening again the field of possibilities, thus liberating, thus *also* covering up). This is a disguise at the level of ontological representation, where some parts are abnegated

while others are signified. Again, it was Nietzsche who represented the creative destruction of modernity through the mythical figure of Dionysus, a figure he saw as "destructively creative" and "creatively destructive" at the same time. Destruction as vandalism, on the other hand, is the ultimate expression of a malignant, evil spirit residing in the dark side of civilization. Yet again, vandalism is needed for the selective implementation of the vandalism-as-opposed-to-creation interpretation, as it has proved greatly useful to the promotion of the ever-stronger contemporary connection between destruction and creation; one that arises from comparing nonvandalistic destruction (at least, so described) to a kind of maneuver.

For to see destruction as a maneuver (one that prevents a system from ceasing to exist, that enables the continuation of its *life* in a new form, that enables its adjustment) is a metaphor that gives birth to a handful of animated interpretations in which everything that is being destroyed, devastated, overthrown, and collapsed is seen only as collateral damage in an overall process of evolution. And the notion of evolution itself seems to fit perfectly, as destruction now becomes a necessity: recall Darwin and his interpreters, or the development of catastrophe theory by René Thom in his study of dynamic systems and morphogenesis. Adaptability, as introduced by the evolutionists,[3] has been presented as a rule of survival and, more than that, in the terms of an ongoing war with a hostile and relatively inflexible environment.

5.

It is in such terms that urbanism—or more broadly, the production and management of space—is being promoted. When employed in the built environment, the process of creative destruction is described as an essential (and sufficient) step for the *regeneration* of urban (or regional) life, with "regeneration" serving as the central metaphor for the implementation of the process.

The transcription of an economic process into what is built (or torn down) is fairly easy. Like with economy, destruction (here of the urban fabric) is not a deviation from development; it is development's modus operandi. For David Harvey (2010, 85), the production of the urban environment and capitalism are undoubtedly linked: "The built environment that constitutes a vast field of collective means of production and consumption absorbs huge amounts of capital in both its construction and its maintenance. Urbanization is one way to absorb the capital surplus." In other (Marshall Berman's) words (1988, 99), "Even the most beautiful and impressive bourgeois buildings and public works are disposable, capitalized for fast depreciation and planned to be obsolete, closer in their social functions to tents and encampments than to 'Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, Gothic cathedrals.'" Or as René Schoonbrodt (1987, 35) describes, "The enterprise's need to be in the city, where everything happens, is found also in the regenerating mechanisms. These mechanisms should not be confused as creation, because to create means to 'make something out of nothing' … On the contrary, to regenerate means to articulate what already exists, to establish links between facts or concepts or preexisting operating modes and to realize, through this interaction a new reality."

More recent is Manuel Castells's (2000, 415) interpretation (seen from the perspective of so-called globalization): "These cities [referring to major cities], or rather their business districts, are information-based, value-production complexes … They constitute indeed networks of production and management … The global city," he notes, "is not a place but a process." Directly referring to creative destruction, he writes, "The 'spirit of informationalism' is the culture of 'creative destruction' accelerated to the speed of the optoelectronic circuits that process its signals. Schumpeter meets Weber in the cyberspace of the network enterprise" (199).

Being more precise, Max Page (2001, 2) describes Manhattan's development as "an urban

development process whose central dynamic was not defined by simple expansion and growth but rather by a vibrant and often chaotic process of destruction and rebuilding."

6.

So it seems that through its transcription to the urban and regional space the process of creative destruction—or better, the terms used for the description of an economic process ("creative" and "destruction")—gains its literal meaning. Destruction becomes a real practice with real, material aftermaths when it comes to the built environment. Of course, destruction can be symbolic in the real space too, through, for instance, the changes of use or the interconnections between urban (or transurban) cores, albeit even then people feel the process in a very real way (Baudelaire screamed, "Le vieux Paris n'est plus!"[Old Paris is no more]).

When the city incorporates the process to such a degree that the city *becomes the process* (and so the "city as place" metaphor gives way to "the city as process" one, as Castells noticed), then it seems that space loses its material substance. Nothing seems to be more important than the process itself, the interconnections, the innovation, the incessant alterations. And this process lasts long; no one knows its end, its demise as a system. That is perhaps why the conflation of destruction with the notion of decay (essentially, a very long process of degeneration, of corruption) is often deliberate in urban space. Once an urban or regional area is analyzed in terms of degeneration, the processes of gentrification can readily be brought into action, thus remobilizing the circulation of surplus value. And yet there is already within decay a perspective of development, of creation: Polybius, among many thinkers, glorified the creative power of decay.

7.

9

"La belle architecture, c'est celle qui fera de belles ruines" (Beautiful architecture is that which will make beautiful ruins), Auguste Perret renounced. And indeed, to destroy in order to create has led to its antipode: to create in order to destroy, to rationalize and standardize creation in such a way that its destruction becomes more efficient. Thus, we meet prefabricated construction in central and eastern Europe right from the beginning of the twentieth century. Construction gets accelerated, is reversible, recyclable.

But what now promotes (more than ever) one of the most basic conceptions of modern movement is the fast-growing (and mostly artificial) anxiety over construction debris, noise, and vibrations and the enormous amount of dust produced by demolitions. It is the same anxiety that leads to scientific innovation and research into new techniques in ("safe") building demolition. In most cases, this research does not develop separately from the strong environmental interest that capital adopted during the 90s. The change toward an environmentally sensitive model, the introduction of environmental protection into the market's mechanisms, and the redesigning of industrial processes to reduce pollution and waste are how capitalism revives itself.

Thus, all the interest about "safe demolitions" is nothing, in fact, but a refinement of the literal applications of creative destruction's processes—that is, of real building demolitions. "All that is solid," writes Marshall Berman (1988, 99), using the famous Communist Manifesto quote, "from the clothes on our backs … to the houses and neighborhoods the workers live in … to the towns and cities and whole regions and even nations that embrace them all—all these, are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms."

8.

That disassembling the city as a process of revaluation is an inherently weighty, meticulous job is a commonplace. As Berman implied, creative destruction cannot count on chance. It strikes, yes, the best situated parts of the center, but it does strike also "the houses and neighborhoods the workers live in" and the city monuments marked by struggles and riots; it wipes out any inconvenient history—to narrate a more convenient one; it incessantly writes and rewrites urban iconography.

But if, as is usually thought to be the case, the only thing at stake is to prevent the environmental degradation that creative destruction causes (and not its intrinsic reactionary tactics), then an ecologically sensitive demolition can validate this trend for innovation—a trend that, nevertheless, will always be followed by the reconstruction of urban narrative. And if construction can become reversible (i.e., can be dismantled), then maybe there is no need for more arguments: destruction and every new construction may be welcomed as the inevitable, luckily harmless stages of creative destruction's process in the cities. (Of course, no one really seems to deal with the fact that ensuring reversibility is just one of many parameters in environmental building.)

Still, even in the case that physical destruction finds, in this sense, the way to be celebrated, there is always room for other oppressions, achieved through symbolic means. Possibly, the process of creative destruction, implied in urban space, more often does not have to reach this point of simplification, so that it has to literally destruct in order to interfere in urban iconography. There is not much ground to argue that preservation (of individual buildings or complexes) can well be a form of constraint, not only because—for the sake of historical consistency—subsequent extensions may/will have to be subtracted but also because what is "preserved" has to be respected, imposing itself as cultural monument.

9.

The word crisis wouldn't mean so much to us were it not for economic crises. But there are lots of other crises: political, societal, cultural, ethical, and emotional ones. And there is war, dereliction, and natural disasters, all as if meant to clear the ground for the creation of new wealth. It goes without too serious thinking that the process of creative destruction can be implemented in the case of a natural disaster or in the case of any cataclysmic anthropogenic disaster, such as war. Creative destruction is, as noted, destruction presented as a maneuver, a mechanism of adaptation. In this respect, it can absorb calamities, whether they be caused by creative destruction itself or not, and it can further strengthen itself through them.

All kinds of crises require an urgent response; unexpected and unwelcome situations need immediate solutions. Thus, obstacles to innovation are overcome: any great disaster liberates possibilities, ensures public consensus (sometimes indispensible for the application of politics that would otherwise be unacceptable), and takes advantage of the produced shock, disorder, and disorientation.[4]

In war, for instance, physical destruction can, again, either be strategically (by causing damage to infrastructure) or symbolically targeted (by the annihilation of cultural symbols). Of course, there is collateral damage in an overall project of elimination (something that is not true for urban development, at the same levels of atrocity at least), thus helping spread the horror. Buildings and dead bodies are turned into an amorphous, nondescript mass—a vague aggregate: what war or natural disasters leave after they pass, thus facilitating further economic explorations.

10.

And yet, over and above the analysis we have gone through, there is something that seems quite

unavoidable when speaking about (or writing on) the process of creative destruction: having to fall back on the figurative schema of personification. What is an essentially abstract economical description—creative destruction—acquires animate (more often human) features and is presented as having a life of its own. Personification is thus a kind of avoidance strategy designed to introduce the process of creative destruction in terms of a rather spontaneous self-emergence—something that, interestingly enough, is also valid for the description of capitalism, albeit the details of such mechanisms are hard to get at.[5]

Perhaps worth noticing is that, on the city scale, the "city as living being" metaphor finds much of its reasoning with creative destruction as the descriptive schema: "The comparison with the living organism in the evolution of species … can tell us something very important about the city: how on passing from one era to the other the living species either adopt their organs in new functions or they disappear" (Italo Calvino, "Los dioses de la ciudad"; quoted in Catalán 2011; translation mine). So also the structural relations between the parts of these two (city, living body), as now the city center is called its "heart" (or better, characterized as "neuralgic," consisting of the political and economic core of the city) and the roads, which allow fast circulation, "arteries." And of course there will always be those "cancerous" zones, forcing the regeneration of whole districts.

When it comes to war, anthropomorphization reaches its peak. Phenomenology and cognitive linguistics have often tried to discuss how people tend to identify themselves (through metaphor) with the built environment that surrounds their everyday activities (although one could count lots of other explanations as to why people care so much about the buildings they live in or use frequently). Jean-Paul Sartre (1966, 300) put it more poetically: "My body is everywhere: the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body insofar as the house has already an indication of my body."

For what truly activates organic or biological metaphors is rather the fact that the organic is perceived as a self-regulating system that carries the reasons for its own change and development—something that is specifically true for the self-destructive, self-preservational character of capitalism as we have described it.[6] We can imagine, of course, why these metaphors ("urban DNA" being one of the most innovative ones) are so important to capitalism: the whole process is presented as natural ("It's life!"). But unlike organisms, unlike human bodies, unlike biological variation and natural selection, there will always be, in the urban context or elsewhere, deliberate purpose applied to individual instances of variation, selection, and crises—provoked or used, in essence, by a certain economic system: capitalism. Most importantly, these kinds of metaphors hide the fact that capital is a social relation entailing a class conflict and a subject whose historical praxis can disrupt the success of the relation's self-preservation process.

So destruction is likely to remain viable for capitalism only as long as it is personified (or more than that, described) through the use of a purely biological (scientific) language. It is not irrelevant that the most extreme expression (and guarantee) of capitalism—that is, fascism—admires deeply both destruction and biology. Being the most powerful formula for the aestheticization of politics, fascism is the extreme beautification of destruction, as well as of biological purity. And the interweaving of fascist discourses on destruction and biology in a way confirms one's strong need for the other within a capitalist context (an implicit fact that demands, though, a much more thorough analysis). Capitalist destruction as a clearing out, as the essential precondition of creation, or as the natural condition of capitalism's self-preservation, as discussed above, are all aspects of the same living creature (exceptionally dear to biological terminologies). Vandalism, on the other hand, an unproductive, uncreative destruction, seems indefinitely unwelcome to the "life circle" of capitalism; it is presented as denying life and promoting death.

Vandalism is expelled, but not quite. It is "incorporated" into capitalism, partaking in capitalism's body, in two ways: as madness and as displacement, or deformation. Madness because it is interpreted as such in the formal and academic clinical, sociological, psychological, and criminological discourses. Vandalistic behavior can be prevented, remediated, healed. Displacement because it suggests first of all a deviation (from what is formed as part of capitalism's dominant norm—and that is after all what madness ultimately suggests); second, a transmutation (of the existing to "free space," to "fresh air"); third, a juxtaposition (as all possibilities are condensed during the act of vandalism); and last, a transposition (through the Benjaminean "pathways"). Vandalism can thus create other spaces; it can create heterotopias, to use the Foucauldian term. Of course, these other spaces can also be reintegrated, exploited by capital.[7]

Yet naturally, where else but in a form of destruction that questions and annoys capitalism and that has not only been "the great instrument of economic development … but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination," as Foucault (1994, 762) once beautifully described his heterotopian boat, could one find the possibilities of an existence beyond capitalism? A destruction expelled by capitalism could be suggesting one of indeed many undeniable ways out of capitalism, as the symbolic, pure violence of a general strike necessarily suggests. Not a maneuver, not a regeneration, not a revaluation, not as if meant to clear the ground for the re-creation of surplus value but, given certain historical circumstances, a redefining of things, a revolution.

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[1] The discourse that invests this kind of recommendation is also worth some attention. As Le Corbusier (1929, 128, 232) formulated it, "Therefore the existing centres must come down. To save itself, every great city must rebuild its centre." And likewise, "We must build on a clear site!"

[2] See Schumpeter (1994, xiv).

[3] "Adaptation is the heart and soul of evolution," Niles Eldredge (1995, 33) remarked.

[4] The exploitation of disaster-shocked people and countries has been explicitly presented in Naomi Klein's (2007) *The Shock doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.

[5] It is not by chance that Schumpeter (1994, 82–3) uses a biological term in his description of capitalism: "The opening-up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development from the craft shop and factory to such concerns as U.S. Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term—that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one."

[6] The perception of the organic as a self-developing system is at least as old as its Kantian definition, that

of "an organised unity, not an aggregate" which may "grow from within, but not by external addition" (Kant 1998, 860–1).

[7] Ironically, even the term "heterotopia" belongs also to medical and biological terminology. In medicine it refers to the presence of a particular tissue type at a nonphysiological site, an *ectopia*, the displacement of an organ or other parts; in biology it refers to an altered location of trait expression. See West-Eberhard (2003).