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“REPRESENTATION OF REPRESENTATIONS”:
CAPITAL AS A MYTHOLOGY IN MOVEMENT*

La nave ha anche un motore
ed avendo un motore
non sa dove va ma continua a andare
Giorgio Gaber, *La nave*

Capital as a mythology. – When I state that capital is a mythology in movement, I adopt the term “mythology” according to the meaning provided by Roland Barthes in its *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1974). In this work, whose title has been distorted and trivialized in the Italian edition *Miti d’oggi*, Barthes¹ puts up a witty game that reveals the social imaginary of 1950’s France. He shows how a signification mechanism is silently at work in it; an ideological system – the system of bourgeois culture – that presents itself as a factual system, transforming history in nature, and significant in signified. When he compares the Citroën DS 19 to the great Gothic cathedrals, or reduces the epopee of the Tour de France («The Tour thus possesses a veritable Homeric geography. As in the *Odyssey*, the race is here both a periplus of ordeals and a total exploration of the earth’s limits»), Barthes doesn’t aim simply at sketching a chronicle of the more-or-less ephemeral status symbols or vogues of an era; he really is trying to show «the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world [...]. And this image has a remarkable feature: it is upside down» (*ibidem*, p. 222). This movement has a triadic rhythm that is articulated around the compromise (or *analogic signification*) between a latent content (or proper sense of the myth) and a form that works as a significant. In this sense the myth is a composed semiologic system, where a (suggested) equivalence is mistaken for an (evident) casual process. A typical example of a mythical image is the front page of *Paris-Match* where a black soldier, wearing a French uniform, is saluting in the military fashion; behind the *naïveté regardée*, the «maintained ingenuity» of the image – that is its first, manifest, declared and literal meaning – an implicit, non-declared, occult and analogic content is hidden that, consumed with the first, is assumed in an unquestioned way: which better testimony of French colonialism, Barthes glosses, than a colonized that joins the cause of the colonizer?²

Even though David Harvey in its *Seventeen Contradictions* doesn’t use this expression (Harvey, 2014), it’s difficult to refuse the impression that for him, too, in a sense, capital possesses a mythopoeic quality, as an incessant producer of social mythologies, if it’s not to be considered a myth itself. I don’t

* Translation by Alberto Maffini.

¹ 2015 is a very special year for Barthes, as we remember at the same time the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth and the thirty-five years that have passed since his death.

² In geography, a case of mythical signification is the construction of iconography in the 1908 re-edition of Paul Vidal de Blanche’s *Tableau*. The photos included, which were given to Vidal by many of the university geographers of the era, as well as by botanists, geologists and agronomists, serve a thesis that is connected to the patriotic-republican ideals of the author: apart from its geologic and human variety («Le mot qui caractérise le mieux la France est variété», France is a person, *a geographic individual*). These images play the function of mimesis and substitute of a “direct vision of things”, that is of the traits of the *physionomie d’un pays*, as the sensible manifestation of the *genius loci*, the sensible manifestation of a super-sensible reality (Tanca, 2012, pp. 129-144).

deny, though, that there are some objective difficulties that play in disfavour of this thesis. While Barthes, focusing his attention on a double movement: the transformation (of reality in image) and the overturning (of the image obtained in this way, which is turned upside-down), works openly on the naturalization of history that takes place in the mythical *representations* (and the debt with Karl Marx is paid with an explicit reference to the famous metaphor of the *Camera obscura*), Harvey since the 'Prologue' of his book stresses out the inextinguishable capacity of capital to manipulate and act on the visible features of places, modifying them completely through a series of frenetic transitions from a material form and a physic state to another:

Much gets torn down and laid waste to make way for the new. Once productive landscapes are turned into industrial waste-lands, old factories are torn down or converted to new uses, working-class neighbourhoods get gentrified. Elsewhere, small farms and peasant holdings are displaced by large-scale industrialised agriculture or by sleek new factories. Business parks, R&D and wholesale warehousing and distribution centres sprawl across the land in the midst of suburban tract housing, linked together with clover-leafed highways. Central cities compete with how tall and glamorous their office towers and iconic cultural buildings might be, mega-shopping malls galore proliferate in city and suburb alike, some even doubling as airports through which hordes of tourists and business executives ceaselessly pass in a world gone cosmopolitan by default [*ibidem*, p. 3].

Unprecedented reifying activity; devastating processes of structuration of the physical space; production of a geographical landscape that favours the reproduction of capital – of course³. And even so, another perspective, similar to a Karst river, flows parallel to this, and finally comes out in the open as soon as Harvey admits the existence, alongside a material landscape, formed by physical forms, of an immaterial one, composed by values and symbolic (iconic, discursive and mental) states that nurture our imagery («our mental conceptions of the world and of our place in it») and the latter is no less important than the first for the functioning of capital. It is a mythological universe inhabited by those things that, in Contradiction n. 2 – where, not haphazardly, the representation of the social value of work through money is themed – are called *representations of representations*.

like all forms of representation (maps come to mind), there is a gap between the representation and the social reality it is seeking to represent. The representation does a good job of capturing the relative value of social labour in some respects, but it misses out and even falsifies in others (much as maps are accurate representations of some features of the world around us but misleading about others).

[...]

It is all too easy to mistake the representation for the reality it seeks to represent, and to the degree that the representation falsifies (as to some degree it always does) we end up believing in and acting upon something that is false [*ibidem*, pp. 38-39].

If it is so difficult to untangle the aporias and the contradictions of capital, it is because these don't end up only in a simple game between the referent and its image, offering an easy task of pointing out the incongruences between one and the other. In the quoted extract Harvey suggests an analogy

³ The idea that capital is in its essence movement, restlessness, *dynamis*, and that these properties don't constitute accessory or irrelevant qualities, but the primary condition of its existence, it's one of the great gifts of the epistemological rupture operated by Marx on the Hegelian model, at the same time static and cartographical, of world representation. Whereas for Hegel «For although the Earth forms a sphere, History performs no circle around it» (Hegel, 1956, p. 103), Marx anchors the birth of a global market to the spherical aspect of the Earth, which implies that the market would find no reason for its existence without this curve: «Since the world is round, the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan would seem to have completed this process [the creation of Weltmarkt, the world market]» (Marx, 1985, p. 345).

(that he doesn't explore in detail⁴) between map and money, but the case of the financialization of the economy, as it is based on a double fetish, being a symbol of symbols (money as the representation, at the same time physical and symbolical, of the social value of work), is more articulated and swishy, and in any case it cannot be reduced to a mere exchange between the representation and the reality that this tries to represent: «When money commodities are represented by numbers, this introduces a serious and potentially misleading paradox into the monetary system. Whereas gold and silver are relatively scarce and of constant supply, the representation of money as numbers allows the quantity of money available to expand without any technical limit» (*ibidem*, pp. 20-21). The consequence of all this is that «we end up with representations of representations of social labour as the basis of the money form! There is, as it were, a double fetish (a double set of masks behind which the sociality of human labour for others is hidden)» (*ibidem*, p. 21). As Barthes' *Mythologies*⁵ tell us, the mythical image doesn't lead directly to the thing itself, but to another image; that is what, at the end, Harvey himself suggests through the metaphor of the ship, that allows him to illustrate the distinction between capital/capitalism⁶, that is to say between the conditions of possibility and their effective realization. We will never get tired of criticising the geographical landscapes produced by capitalism in their most anonymous and polluting aspects; but – and this, I think, is the meaning of his reasoning – this critique, if it really wants to be incisive, must evolve in a critical exam of the same *idea* of landscape that is consubstantial to capitalism and, from there, to a critic of capital. Then, if we start from the assumption that capital represents the economic engine of capitalism, and that «Everything that happens on this ship is contingent on this engine continuing to function» (*ibidem*, p. 21), limiting ourselves to criticizing cruise speed or life on the decks – following along Harvey's metaphor – is equal to staying on the surface of things, letting go of the same nucleus of the problem: why would we want to substitute this “economic engine”, and with what?

Representations of representations. – This elusive game of references emerges cyclically in the *Seventeen contradictions* to remind us that capital is «a moving target» (p.93) and, as such, it pushes itself further and further, leaving behind a trail of representations of representations that makes our efforts of taking a grasp of it, of thinking *beyond* the mythology, vain. This is again true for example in Contradiction n.4 (“Private Appropriation and Common Wealth”), which opens with a sharp and canonical distinction between, on one hand, predatory practices and illicit activities, considered as «excrescences external to the ‘normal’ and legitimate functioning of the capitalist market» (*ibidem*, p. 33) and, on the other hand, legal exchanges (naturally “good”) in non-coercive conditions in freely functioning markets. The dichotomy reduces typically all the phenomena of private appropriation to two spheres that are jointly exhaustive and reciprocally exclusive: normal and abnormal (this last condition representing a pathological degeneration, with a shade of the monstrous, a monstrosity well synthesized by the vocabulary adopted). We are fully immersed in the myth, in the fiction; both because the boundary between “good” and “pathological” appropriation is given as a “natural” and auto-evident fact, and because the possibility of a *symbiotic relation* subsisting between these two precincts is categorically excluded by the «economics textbooks», which, as we know from Kuhn onward, are (as every other textbook) the discursive places where the “canonical” image of a science crystallizes. And

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the analogy between cartographical representation and market, see Farinelli (2009, pp. 26-29).

⁵ But let's also think about the famous Platonic example of the carpenter and the painter (*Repubblica*, 597a).

⁶ «I here make, however, a clear distinction between *capitalism* and *capital*. This investigation focuses on capital and not on capitalism. So what does this distinction entail? By capitalism I mean any social formation in which processes of capital circulation and accumulation are hegemonic and dominant in providing and shaping the material, social and intellectual bases for social life. Capitalism is rife with innumerable contradictions, many of which, though, have nothing in particular to do directly with capital accumulation.[...] I am not saying, therefore, that everything that happens under capitalism is driven by the contradictions of capital. But I do want to identify those internal contradictions of capital that have produced the recent crises and made it seem as if there is no clear exit without destroying the lives and livelihoods of millions of people around the world.» (Harvey, 2014, pp. 9-10).

here lies the *double fetish*: the deviations and the degenerations of illegal activities (mafias, tax haven etc.) that still produce enormous revenues, influencing on common richness as well as on the development trajectories of global economy⁷, are left out of the reasoning we should do on expropriation logics: «In this constructed world certain truths stand out as self-evident, chief of which is that everything under the sun must be in principle and wherever technically possible subject to commodification, monetisation and privatisation» (*ibidem*, p. 37). This way the naturalization operated by the myth, its *pseudo-physis*, as Barthes would call it, hides the unnatural aspect of the distinction according to which appropriation forms such as land grabbing – which takes place, for more than 70% of the cases in Sub-Saharan Africa (Deininger, Byerlee et alii, 2010, p. XIV) – are free, normal, legitimate.

Contradiction n.10 (“Monopoly and competition”) offers the example of another rhetoric form assumed by capital as a moving mythology: urban branding and marketing, which takes advantage, on one hand, of symbolical forms such as logos, icons, trademarks and images, and, on the other, of an intense restyling activity of the urban landscape.

Cities like Barcelona, Istanbul, New York and Melbourne get branded, for example, as tourist destinations or as hubs for business activities by virtue of their unique characteristics and special cultural qualities. If there are no particularly unique features to hand, then hire some famous architect, like Frank Gehry, to build a signature building (like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao) to fill the gap. History, culture, uniqueness and authenticity are everywhere commodified and sold to tourists, prospective entrepreneurs and corporate heads alike, yielding monopoly rents to landed interests, property developers and speculators. The role of the class monopoly rent that is then gained from rising land values and property prices in cities like New York, Hong Kong, Shanghai, London and Barcelona is hugely important for capital in general. The gentrification process that is then unleashed is, worldwide, a critical part of an economy based as much on accumulation through dispossession as on creating wealth through new urban investments [Harvey, 2014, pp. 81-82].

Promesse de bonheur, these brands and logos don't have the real city, with its problems and delays, as their direct counterpart; rather, they connect with a *depurated, winning, successful image* that can take a leading place in the international competition, thanks to its uniqueness, recognisability and appeal. Whenever the “representation policy” (Rossi, Vanolo, 2010, pp. 29-52) bases all its strength on responding to the rules of *citymarketing*, and intervenes on the landscape and urban decorations, on the logistics, on the real estate market, on the welcoming spaces and on traffic without obtaining concrete enhancements of the quality of life of its inhabitants, it ends up showing all its limits, revealing itself as a pure propagandistic operation. In this last excerpt Harvey mentions, not in vain, the resort to *archistars* to project *iconic cultural buildings*. The signing of these actors, as well as a “big events” (Olympic Games, Universal Exhibitions, Fairs, etc.) policy seem to have become mandatory steps in the construction of new urban mythologies (at least for those subjects who can afford their high costs). If we ask ourselves why cities need marketing, but only a few are successful at it (Scamuzzi, 2002), a possible answer is that, in order for success to happen, it is necessary that the truth value they convey can be critically accessible; the critique to the material landscapes created by capital needs to be seen also as a critique to its *imago mundi* and its mythologies, especially where the radiant promises of the latter don't find full satisfaction in the real world.

“Capital's Relation to Nature”, the theme of contradiction n. 16, allows us to meditate on another variation of the capitalist production of fetishes of fetishes. “Nature” as the subject of this

⁷ It is calculated that 'ndrangheta's revenues in 2013 were equal to 3.5% of Italian GDP, more than Deutsche Bank and McDonald's together (Internazionale, 2014). According to official data (World Bank, IMF, Central Banks) offshore capitals transferred into tax havens add up to somewhere between 21 and 32 thousand billion dollars, a third of which originates in developing countries (Amato, 2013).

dissertation is, once again, a transfigured significant, disguised as a signified, ideology naturalized through authenticity and made acceptable even in its most irrational aspects. In the “reality of the world” (retaking Barthes’ expression) capital conceives nature as business, use value, «a mere objectified commodity», that is the *product* of the processes of circulation and accumulation. Some readers of the *Seventeen contradictions* will perhaps turn up their noses when confronted with passages like this one, where Harvey says «a working and evolving ecological system within which both nature and capital are constantly being produced and reproduced» (Harvey, 2014, p. 141); yet the negation of this metabolic relationship (and of its dramatic contradictions) is precisely the myth of nature as a depurated, normalized and overturned image of the “reality of the world”. This is what happens for example when natural disasters are explained through pretentious natural causes and not considering the practices we adopt when we enter in relation with the environment. Such is the case of “environmental migrations”, whose cause is more often brought back to unspecified environmental causes rather than portraying the real connections that these maintain with social and economic factors such as, for example, the exploitation of local resources for exportation (cfr. Bagliani, Pietta, 2013). But the “place” where the mythology of nature finds its maximum celebration as image of an image is the touristic landscape. If we say the truth, when we talk about the “touristic landscape” we are referring with one expression to the convergence of two different experiences: the fruition of an artificial landscape, built in its entirety and formed by settlements, services and infrastructures that are the product and the result of the touristic phenomenon; and the access to the “nature” intended as somewhere else, a totally alien reality where the liberation – in reality, only an apparent, and momentary liberation – from everyday life, and our role as consumers, is possible. The “emeraldization” of Sardinia shows what happens when mythologies interfere with territorialisation processes. A hybrid architectural style, such as the one that characterized the touristic settlements of the ‘60s between Arzachena and Olbia, completely lacking of any identity bonds with the territory and born out of the juxtaposition and the shuffling of different styles, after gaining a leader position in the market in spite of others, is retaken, copied and spread all over until becoming a model of the “Sardinian style” – becoming eventually an emblem of authenticity (this phenomenon has been studied at the beginning of the ‘80s by the American geographer Richard Price; cfr. Price, 1983). When it is so difficult to distinguish the authentic from the anonymous, that means this distinction has no longer reason to exist.

Good shots in Hong Kong. – There is an image where, thanks to its vivid aspect, a lot of the issues presented in the previous pages are synthesized: it’s a shot taken in 2013 by the photojournalist Alex Hofford for “ChinaFoto Press” (fig. 1)⁸. The setting is in Hong Kong and the image at first doesn’t raise any complications, offering to the viewers an everyday, familiar situation, well-known to people who live in the whereabouts of touristic destinations: a

⁸ I’ve already used this evocative photo in a paper about the role of photography in Works by P. Vidal de la Blache and J. Brunhes (Tanca, 2015).



FIG. 1. – Hong Kong fake skyline.

Source: <http://petapixel.com> (photo by Alex Hofford ©).

souvenir photo we take to produce a visual memory of our trip. So, we are in Hong Kong, and, as geographers, we will remember that the colony, administrated by Great Britain until 1997, is now, with Macao, one of the two special administrative regions of the Popular Republic of China. It is a *global city*, one of the most important financial centres of the global economy, which benefited from the displacement of the gravity centre of economic development to Eastern, South-Eastern and South Asia that started in the '60s and the '70s, and which is now fully integrated in the processes of capitalist accumulation. Hong Kong is a tax haven which harbours one of the highest concentrations of banks (Italian, too) and can boast one of the highest incomes of the world. What is most striking to a geographer's eye, though, it's its *urban landscape*. With over 7 million inhabitants spread over 1104 square kilometres, Hong Kong is one of the most densely inhabited places on earth. As an old Marxist saying goes, the art of fishing is hard to master in fishless waters; so, the objective lack of space has been compensated by providing a vertical housing for the growing number of inhabitants and infrastructures, which has deserved the city the title of *the most vertical city in the world*. And, actually, data inform us about the outrageous (over 1200) number of skyscrapers – more than in any other city in the world! – as well as the record for the tallest buildings (52 skyscrapers are over 200 metres high) or the number of people who work or live here above the 14th floor. All these elements confirm what a simple gaze of the city skyline had already grasped: the unique character of the city, dominated by this vertiginous impression of verticality.

Yet, Hong Kong can not only be described as a vertical city, but also as an “invisible city”, for reasons that have little to do with Italo Calvino, but that are infinitely more prosaic: the atmospheric pollution caused by the combination of particles and gases owed to coal plants and the traffic of ships and vehicles, apart from the industries lying on the shores of the Pearl River's Delta. As data show mercilessly, Hong Kong's inhabitants have to put up with a visibility reduced to less than 8 km for the 30% of the year (fig. 2,) and with increasing cases of infection from bronchial asthma, which raised to alarming levels due to the poor quality of the air, with high concentrations of sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and other particles in aerosol. These problems are worsened by the lack of space for inhabitant⁹.

⁹ In order to have a better idea of the problema (which has also a relevant impact on economic terms), see: <http://www.scmp.com/topics/hong-kong-air-pollution>.

So it seems that a clear, bright sky is a *rare commodity* in Hong Kong, whereas the phenomenon of the *hazy sky* is an integrant part in the life of its population. It's interesting to notice that, when this situation had been immortalized on the front page of the Lonely Planet guide in 2002, replacing the classical image of the city composed by shimmering lights, rushes and symbols of the Chinese presence, this choice – a deliberate outrage to one of the fundamental figures of the myth: tautology – provoked embarrassment and a shocked reaction by local politicians (McMillan, 2002). In 2013 media have spread some news that goes perfectly along with the idea of capital as a “moving target”, always zealous in the repression of dissent¹⁰, but not so much prone to facing its own contradictions directly, on the contrary, quite willing to avoid them and displace them somewhere else. Since the atmospheric dough of smog and fog made the sky hazy, the solution adopted by the Chinese government consisted – and so we go back to Alex Hofford's photo from where we started – in creating a *fake skyline*, an enormous photographic poster of Hong Kong shot in felicitous atmospheric conditions, without any mistiness and, thus, well-suited for the realization of a *good shot* by the tourists. We are, and it's almost superfluous to say, fully inside a representation of a representation which exemplifies more than any discourse the peculiar *modus operandi* of capital: the tourist will take home with him, along with the photo-souvenir, an illusionary substitute of reality, the image of an image, thoroughly pacified and depurated of the problems that still lie beyond the poster, unresolved.



FIG. 2. – Hong Kong's trademark: its hazy skyline.

Source: <http://hk-magazine.com>.

¹⁰ Just think about the protest (September 2014-February 2015) of the so-called *yellow umbrellas movement* (activists pro-democracy and students) who asked more autonomy from the Chinese central government (election candidates must be approved by a special committee, which is itself appointed by Beijing's government).

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“REPRESENTATIONS OF REPRESENTATIONS”: CAPITAL AS A MYTHOLOGY IN MOVEMENT. – In reading *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* by David Harvey, one thing is clear: through continuous transitions from one material form to another, capital ends up to create a geographical landscape favourable to its own reproduction: once productive landscapes are turned into industrial deserts, old farms are demolished or converted to new uses, small factories and peasant holdings are displaced by industrial agriculture on a large-scale, working-class neighbourhoods get gentrified; offices, iconic cultural buildings and shopping malls proliferate in the urban landscape.

But next to this, capital produces symbolic forms and intangibles landscape that consists in our mental concepts of the world and of our place in it: these forms are "representations of representations", e.g. social mythologies such as those studied by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies*: the mythical image does not refer directly to things, but to another image. This is the reason why is so hard (but compelling) defuse the contradictions of capital, as in the case of Hong Kong.

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