

## LATOUR, LE CORBUSIER AND SPIRIT OF THE TIME.

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### Abstract.

*This paper proposes to investigate the late European modern culture by means of the analysis of the expression of the spirit of the time in Le Corbusier's texts on urbanism. Firstly, it is based on the interpretation of modernity elaborated by Bruno Latour. Secondly, it assumes that the demonstrations of the spirit of*

*that period are present not solely that period are present not solely in the philosophical and culturological inquiry but also in respective urban theory and projects. The hypothesis is a statement that Le Corbusier's urbanism exposes the emotional rage of the late European modernity.*

**Keywords:** B. Latour – Le Corbusier – modernity – spirit of the age – urbanism

### Introduction

Why to examine the late modern culture in Western Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? There are three basic reasons to be engaged in researching of this topic.

1. **Historical importance:** the historical period from approximately the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century represents the centerpiece of cultural transformations which had been evolving from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is a crucial time for this development.
2. **Time-lapse interpretation:** the longer-term interval between present time and considered period should enable us to accomplish the more integrated historical explanation. Time-lapse interpretation involves showing historical continuities together, so that a very slow and longer process seems to happen much faster and unified.
3. **Historical contrast:** the comprehensive and comparative interpretation of the historical period preceding the present time will help us to better understand the current conditions.

In the following sections we briefly describe the Bruno Latour's explanation of modernity which we subsequently enrich by the comments on the Le Corbusier's modern theory of urbanism.

## Bruno Latour and modernity

Bruno Latour, contemporary philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist, has tackled a problem of modernity in his well-known essay *We have never been modern* (1991)

<sup>1</sup>. He asks what it means to be modern and under what conditions it is thinkable what we call a **modernity**. With a great deal of simplification Latour writes: „The hypothesis of this essay is that the word 'modern' designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by 'translation', creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by 'purification', creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other. Without the first set, the practices of purification would be fruitless or pointless. Without the second, the work of translation would be slowed down, limited, or even ruled out.” (Latour, 1993, p. 10). The link between the work of purification and the work of mediation has given birth to the modernity, but it credit only the former with their success.

The most inspiring moment of this text is the statement that historical development of modern times had been conditioned by **the work of hybridization** which had been unwittingly allowed by **the work of purification**. Modern rationality supposed that it purged and divided world, nevertheless it started to promote the unrestrained mixture. The more it seemed that everything was under control, the more it was unpredictable: “The moderns confused products with processes. They believed that the production of bureaucratic rationalization presupposed rational bureaucrats; that the production of universal science depended on universalist scientists; that the production of effective technologies led to the effectiveness of engineers; that the production of abstraction was itself abstract.” (Ibid, p. 115). It implies the simple conclusion that the world strictly divided into the nature and society did not actually exist and therefore we have never been modern.

## Flatness of Latour's purification

How Latour redistributed the structure of the concept of modern times? First of all, in his analyses he arranged all the components concerning that historical period on one common and collective plane. He organized the man, nature, society, culture, science, technology, economy, state, nation and infrastructure (everything in the modern world) next to each other and superimposed<sup>2</sup>.

Next, he defined the practice of hybridization and purification. First is comprised of all the products of mixture which (by its own nature) call into question the predetermined divisions. Second consists of the rational separation of the man and the nature. We have already said what are the relationships between them. In this paper we are interested in the second part of the Latour's modern world, for we suppose that he overlooked the very important aspect of this practice and described it as a purely rational construct: „They thought themselves revolutionary because they invented the universality of sciences that were torn out of local peculiarities for all time, and because they invented gigantic rationalized organizations that broke with all the local loyalties of the past.” (Ibid, p. 120). We aim to broaden the concept of modern purification and to call attention to its non-rational features in order to shape it more plastic and complex. We will recognize, therefore, the motive force and the temper of purification.

## Le corbusier and the spirit of the age

Regarding the **non-rational elements of the purification**, we aren't going to define it through the Latour's or some others philosopher's notes. For this purpose we employ the theory of urbanism of Le Corbusier (1887-1965), the progenitor of modern urbanism, assuming that within the urbanism he was one of the main spokesman of the practice of purification.

Le Corbusier's theory of urbanism excessively adopts such concepts as objectivity, truth, clarity and strictness. This concepts conditioned his approach to the unhealthy industrial city of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and shaped his proposal to its modernistic transformation. Le Corbusier designed the project of the ideal city Ville Contemporaine (1922) based on the rational, uniform and regular plan

which would reflected the triumph of the modern man and reason over the messy and hostile nature: „Man undermines and hacks at Nature. He opposes himself to her, he fights with her, he digs himself in“ (Le Corbusier, 1987, p. 24). This proposals, included with the strictly defined urban functions, clear and invariable ground plan, dominance of lines and right angle, and ordered social stratification, clearly demonstrate Le Corbusier's passion for purification in an application for modern city.

On the one hand, that's the partial validation of Latour's assumption that the modernity was based on the practice of purification. On the other hand, in the case of Le Corbusier there are very specific factor in his theory of urbanism which participate in the mediation between the purification and the hybridization of his project. We are talking about the fundamental belief in the **idea of a progress**. That idea, inherited from the Enlightenment, says that the social system, science, technology and cities are by means of human reason (purification) capable of an endless expansion, improvement and growth: „The idea of progress and final solution of history is a powerful motive of a modern man“ (Gogora, 2010, p. 363). We assume that the idea of progress found one of the best expression just in the thought of Le Corbusier – he managed to express its public feeling: „A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit“. (Le Corbusier, 1986, p. 3). This sensation can be called a collective emotion of a modern progress and the point is that this factor is eloquently articulated in Le Corbusier's texts. There sparkled an innovative spirit and passionate creativity, an emotional rage of the practice of purification.

Why to merge the idea of progress and the emotions or nonrational flows? Sometimes it seems very rational and well-founded: „...shelters for individual, family, and collective life, the very emanation of the life of a society, of a civilization, require a superior ordering.“ (Le Corbusier, 1964, p. 206), however other times the argument for a neverending progress is unreasoning: “The moment comes when a widespread enthusiasm is capable of revolutionising an epoch“ (Le Corbusier, 1987, p. 22) or: “By this immense step in evolution, so brutal and so overwhelming, we

burn our bridges and break with the past" (Ibid, p. 25). Le Corbusier's argumentation for an idea of modern progress is quite ambiguous.

Maybe it was senseless to rationally and practically argue for an endless progress, maybe it was a progress for the sake of progress, nevertheless that idea was such powerful that it brought about something more – intensity, ferment, thrill, rhythm, vision, heartbeat, completely different face-play and gestures of that period: „New forms come to birth; the world adopts a new attitude“ (Ibid, p. 39). The idea of progress became a some kind of belief, the myth, and Le Corbusier's work was the most amazing expression of this obsession, at least in the history of modern urbanism. It embodied an **emotional factor of the modern purification** – spirit of the age, the Zeitgeist.

### Spirit of the age and the hybridization

The development of European cities after the World War II. is well-known. Athens Charter (1943) written by Le Corbusier, thus based on the purification, was at that time an efficient guide for the sanitation of diseased industrial city, the renovation of war-devastated country and the construction of new social house building. It influenced the appearance and functionality of the modern city to a great extent.

In that historical state of affairs can be distinguished three essential sets of practice – purification (Athens Charter), emotional factors of purification (idea of modern progress) and hybridization (disparate and mixed urban activities). According to Latour's original scheme of modern times they are closely interconnected. Purification (purged general city plan), by means of rational division of the human reason and chaotic nature, unintentionally released very complex and mixed processes of urban development and all of its consequences (multiple and heterogeneous realm of the modern megacity). We suppose that, schematically speaking, an idea of modern progress and its emotional feature performed a crucial function between these two practices – it vitalized purification and activated hybridization. The encouraging image of brilliant future penetrates through Le Corbusier's utterances and shapes the proportions of his urban

project, without it he wouldn't be so outstanding purificator, without it he wouldn't change the appearance and functionality of the modern cities in such a hybrid way.

## Outcome

It can be assumed that we successfully extended the Latour's concept of modern purification by the non-rational and emotional feature of the idea of progress. We exemplified it by the case of modern urban theory of Le Corbusier (purification + emotional factor) and its implementation in the form of the construction of prosperous and multilayer modern megacities (hybridization + spirit of the age). In the future it would be worthwhile to analyze similar examples out of the range of urbanism.

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- 1 Latour's latest publication titled *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (2013) represents a positive version of what he negatively outlined in *We have never been modern*, he asks what we were if we were not modern. The remarkable part of this project is a digital platform AiME, which contains summary, index, dictionary, notes and multimedia content: <http://www.modesofexistence.org/index.php/site/index>.
  - 2 This initial monistic assumption directly refers to the Latour's philosophical inspiration of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze – Guattari, 1987, pp. 3-25).