# The Urban Question under Planetary Urbanization

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## Abstract

*In* Le Droit à la Ville *(1968), Lefebvre projects the urban trajectory of his day into the sci-fi imaginary of Isaac Asimov's remarkable* Foundation *series, recognizing the germ of 'Trantor' in our midst, the planet of 40 billion inhabitants where urbanization has reached its absolute maximum; all 75 million square miles of Trantor's land surface are a single city. In* La Révolution Urbaine *(1970), Lefebvre had already begun hinting at a new reality, not only an urban society, but of planetary urbanization. Today, four decades on, Asimov's extraterrestrial universe seems closer to home than ever, and closer to Lefebvre's own terrestrial prognostications: planetary urbanization is creating a whole new spatial world (dis)order. But how shall we reclaim the shapeless, formless and boundless metropolis as a theoretical object and political object of the progressive struggle? If the arena of politics has no discernible form, what would be the form of these politics? What, exactly, are urban politics? This article tries to rethink theoretically the urban question and the question of urban politics in our era of planetary urbanization, working through the political role of the urban in the light of recent 'Occupy' mobilizations.*

> If we cannot produce a new theory, and I agree it is not easy,
> we can at least find new words . . . If we find new words
> we can hope to produce a framework of understanding.
> Without a framework, any means of instrumentality are futile.
> Rem Koolhaas, in Burdett and Sudjic, *The Endless City* (2007)

## Perspective and prospective

In the chapter 'Perspective ou prospective?' of *Le Droit à la Ville*, near the beginning, the Marxist urban studies godfather, Henri Lefebvre, alludes to the godfather of science fiction, Isaac Asimov. Barely a paragraph long, Lefebvre doesn't elaborate on this allusion. Yet even in its brevity Lefebvre's remark is intriguing. In this article, I try to develop what Lefebvre means, or at least what *I think* he might mean. Specifically, I want to use his comments to frame the theoretical and political dilemmas that confront progressives in our age of planetary urbanization. For here Lefebvre is projecting the urban trajectory of his day — 1967, the centenary of Marx's *Capital* — 22,500 years into the future, into the sci-fi imaginary of Asimov's magisterial *Foundation* series, a drama dominated by the giant planet 'Trantor', with 40 billion inhabitants; its entire land surface, 75 million square miles, is a single city, a thoroughly urbanized society of dazzling administrative and technological complexity, dominating a vast galaxy.

From outer space, at night-time, says Asimov (1955: 11), Trantor looks like a 'giant conglomeration of fire-flies, caught in mid-motion and still forever'. 'Trantor's deserts and its fertile areas were engulfed', he says, 'and made into warrens of humanity, administrative jungles, computerized elaborations, vast storehouses of food and replacement parts. Its mountain ranges were beaten down; its chasms filled in. The city's endless corridors burrowed under the continental shelves and the oceans were turned into huge underground aqua-cultural cisterns' (Asimov, 1983: 62). Canopied under a ceiling of millions of steel domes, like a colossal iceberg, nine-tenths of Trantor's social life takes place underground in climate-controlled air and light, with programmed downpours. Nobody recognized day from night any longer, whether the sun shone or not, and after a while few cared. The countryside is but a fuzzy memory based on ancient hearsay; only the Imperial Palace and Trantor's University have real green space. Newcomers would tell you that the air seemed thicker in Trantor, the gravity much greater, its sheer immensity unnerving.

Asimov gives us a brilliant vision of urbanization taken to the max, a veritable utopia-cum-dystopia. In mentioning Asimov, Lefebvre already recognized in the late 1960s the seeds of Trantor in our urban midst. Through Asimov, he seems to call on us to open up our *perspective* on thinking about urban life, daring us to broaden it to the largest remit possible. He wants us to grasp the totality of capitalist urbanization — wholesale and full-scale — to live with that starling *immensity*, to make it our own. We might then be able to think more clearly about politics — about *prospective*, progressive politics under planetary urbanization.

By the time Lefebvre published *La Révolution Urbaine* (1970), he had begun hinting at this new reality: not as a sci-fi reality, but as something that was already there, now: 'The complete urbanization of society', he says. He is being ironic, of course, but only slightly, because, he adds: 'This hypothesis implies a definition: "urban society" is a society that results from a process of complete urbanization. Today, it's virtual, tomorrow it will be real' (*ibid*.: 7). The progression/periodization is evident: we should no longer talk of cities as such, said Lefebvre in *Le Droit à la Ville*; urban society is more appropriate; yet in *La Révolution Urbaine* he began thinking that we should not even be talking of urban society but of *planetary urbanization*, of the complete urbanization of society, of something that's both here and about to come here soon. Trantor is here — not quite — but we can expect it any day now.

Fast-forward four decades: Asimov's extraterrestrial universe seems closer to home than ever, closer to Lefebvre's own terrestrial prognostications: planetary urbanization is creating a whole new spatial world (dis)order. As at 2006, the balance had tipped: the majority of the world's inhabitants, 3.3 billion people, now lived in urban agglomerations, not in rural areas. By 2030, this figure is set to be 4.9 billion, some 60% of the world's population. By then, an extra 590,000 square miles of the planet will have been urbanized, a land surface more than twice the size of Texas, incorporating an additional 1.47 billion urban dwellers. If the trend continues, by 2050, 75% of the planet earth will be urbanized (Burdett and Sudjic, 2007). In truth, these facts and figures aren't very interesting to the political urbanist. The real point is that urbanization is increasing its reach everywhere; the urban is shapeless, formless and apparently boundless, riven with new contradictions and tensions that make it hard to tell where borders reside and what's inside and what's outside.[1] An infinite array of concepts have been brandished to

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1 Louis Wirth, in his classic essay 'Urbanism as a way of life' (1938), still gives one of the best takes on matters: 'The degree to which the contemporary world may be said to be "urban"', Wirth says, 'is not fully or actually measured by the proportion of the total population living in cities. The influences which cities exert upon social life are greater than the ratio of the urban population would indicate, for the city is not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling-place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos' (Wirth, 1938: 2).

identify what this new city form might be: endless city, shrinking city, 100-mile city, global city, mega-city, arrival city, indistinguishable city. What is interesting about these labels is that all try to follow Lefebvre's lead, all try to come to grips with the death of their object, or death of their subject — the city — knowing full well that something has happened, is happening, and that it is hard to get an analytical grip on it. The city was once whole and solid, steel and concrete, there and only there. Now, 'it' is slippery, no longer an 'it', not responding to the old laws of gravity. What is interesting, too, is that every label, no matter how diverse, how insightful, still struggles to retain the social scientific rigor of the term 'city'.

Lefebvre was not so convinced. Urban society, he had announced in *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968: 83), 'constitutes itself on the ruins of the city'. In *The Urban Revolution* (2003: 57), he reiterated this claim, more boldly and in increasing decibels: 'the city exists only as a historical entity', it 'no longer corresponds to a social object. Sociologically, the city is a pseudo-concept'. For that reason, let us stop using the term 'city', he urges, let us change our terminology; let us name a new object that is not a physical object in the usual sense of the term; let us use instead the term 'urban society', or 'urban fabric'; let us try to identify a new theoretical and virtual object that is in the process of becoming. Urban fabric does not narrowly define the built environment of cities, but, says Lefebvre, indicates all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the countryside. Meanwhile, 'urban society' serves a theoretical need and frames a political ambition. It is a hypothesis that is both a point of arrival for a bigger perspective on existing reality and a point of departure for studying a new, emergent reality.

## Blind fields and ways of seeing

Urban society, Lefebvre says, outstrips our cognitive and sensory facilities; the mind boggles at the sensory overload that today's urban process places upon us. The problem, though, is compounded if we continue to think 'city', perceive things through a 'city' lens, through the notion of 'objects', 'categories' and 'things', and through the traditional language and concepts of industrial growth. We need to change our perspective, rethink the urban, he says, in order to think prospectively (Lefebvre, 2003: chapter 2). Otherwise our epistemology will grope in a veritable 'blind field'. Urbanization is not a highly developed manifestation of industrialization, but — and this is the startling thing about Lefebvre's 'urban revolution' thesis — industrialization has been a special sort of urbanization all along. Lefebvre flips the traditional Marxist notion of the historical development of the productive forces on its head; Marx thought industrialization had a sense, was its own finality, being the process as well as the product of the capitalist mode of production.

Marx and Engels never provided an explicit 'urban mode of production', says Lefebvre (1972), but if we look closely at their oeuvre, in a way they did: the city was itself a developmental force, the seat of modern industry, of the division of labour, of the reproduction of labour-power, of technological innovation; and the rise of the industrial city was not only vital for the expansion of productive forces, it was also politically crucial for an ascendant bourgeoisie asserting itself in the passage from feudalism to capitalism. Marx did not know, and could never have known, that urbanization *harbours* the logic of industrialization. Marx had not seen that industrial production *implies* the urbanization of society; that mastering the potentialities of industry demands a specific understanding of the urban process. Beyond a certain level of growth, urbanization creates industrial production, *produces* industrialization, furnishes fertile conditions for the latter, converting industrial contradictions into contradictions of the city, eventually posing anew the urban question, converting it into the question of planetary urbanization.

The urban is now an ontological reality inside us, one that behoves a different *way of seeing*: it is a *metaphilosophical* problem of grappling with ourselves in a world that is

increasingly urbanized. Another 'way of seeing', another way of conceiving urbanization in our mind's eye, is to grasp it as a complex adaptive system, as a chaotic yet determined process.[2] As a concept, even a 'virtual concept', the term 'planetary urbanization' already connotes a shift in perspective, conjures up stirring imagery, maybe even rhetorical imagery, that is seemingly extraterrestrial and futuristic. Already we are propelled into a realm in which our perceptual parameters are being stretched, broadened, opened out; somehow four-dimensionality seems dated. 'Planetary' suggests something more alive and growing, something more vivid than the moribund 'global' or 'globalization'. 'Planetary' truly charts the final frontier, the telos of any earthly spatial fix, of an economic, political and cultural logic that has not been powered by globalization but is one of the key constituent ingredients of globalization, of the planetary expansion of the productive forces, of capitalism's penchant to annihilate space by time, and time by space.

The inner boundedness of the traditional city and of our traditional notion of the city form was prised open by the advent of the industrial city, by capitalist industrial production shedding its geographical and temporal fetters, by the development of new modes of transport, by the invention and reinvention of new technologies, products and infrastructure, by sucking people in when business cycles surged, only to spit them out when markets dipped. From once being absolute spaces, cities became relative spaces, spaces relative to one another in what would, in the second half of the twentieth century, become a global hierarchy, dictated by comparative economic advantage. This historical shift from the absolute to the relative preoccupied Lefebvre in his two great books from the 1970s: *The Urban Revolution* (1970) and *The Production of Space* (1991[1974]).[3] He had taken these circumstances as somehow revolutionary, revolutionary in the Gramscian sense: as a passive revolution — pregnant with all things contrary, for sure, with progressive possibilities, yet counter-revolutionary, a kind of revolution from above, one in which, as Marx and Engels said in *The Communist Manifesto*, 'the bourgeoisie had played a most revolutionary part' (2011[1848]: 67).

So when Lefebvre urges us to reframe the city as 'the urban', he is urging us to abandon the standard frame, to reposition our vision and re-describe what we see as a Cubist artist might have seen it. This was akin to an Einsteinian revolution in the spatial and human sciences, akin to when Einstein began devising his general theory of relativity, problematizing the Newtonian conception of gravity, with its assumptions of absolute time and space. It was a new way of seeing our world, even if it all went beyond our immediate world, beyond our own capacity to see. Einstein's cosmology was itself the harbinger of quantum theory, for the probabilistic theories of 'complementarity' and 'uncertainty' pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s by Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg — even though Einstein had a hard time accepting that role.

Moving away from the notion of a *city* toward *the urban* expressed a paradigm shift on a par with Einstein, a shift from the absolute to the relative, an affirmation of curved time and space, an acceptance that capitalist gravity does not only occur over absolute space, over a passive surface; space and time are themselves capitalist constructs, and the mass and velocity of commodities, of capital and money shifting around the market universe, create their own bending and warping of time and space, their own space–time dimensionality. The virtual reality of global financial markets plays havoc with isotropic

2  'It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world', John Berger says in his groundbreaking text on art criticism, *Ways of Seeing* (1972: 7); 'we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by the world. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight'.
3  Lefebvre also devotes considerable attention to the passage from the feudal (commercial) city to the capitalist (industrial) city in another 1970s book: *La Pensée Marxiste et la Ville* (1972) (see chapter 2: 39–41 and 45–69). The argument is interestingly bedded down in Marx and Engels' *German Ideology* (1970[1846]).

planes of space and with linear conceptions of time, of present and future, confirming time's arrow, not only warping space but physically tearing it apart, too, creating a hidden speculative realm of financial quarks and neutrinos coursing forwards and backwards at the speed of light — at the touch of a trader's keyboard.

## Concrete abstractions and Abstract Expressionism

If a city is a complex adaptive system, the change in tack from 'cities' (in the plural) toward 'the urban' (in the singular) marks a simplifying movement, an analytical sidestep from the concrete to the abstract. The urban, we might say, is more precisely a *concrete abstraction*, the terrain of theoretical knowledge — or, in Lefebvre's lexicon, an 'illuminating virtuality' (2002: 17). Thus, the urban represents a theoretical object and a 'possible object', a *concrete abstraction* similar to how Marx posits the *world market* as the very basis of capitalism; to be sure, we could easily transpose 'urban' for 'world market' without losing any of Marx's clarity of meaning.

In *Capital, Volume III*, Marx said, 'the immanent necessity of this mode of production is to produce the world market on an ever-enlarged scale' (1967[1894]: 333). In the *Grundrisse*, the sentiment is redoubled: 'the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome' (Marx, 1973[1857]: 408). In *Theories of Surplus Value — Part III* he says it is 'only foreign trade, the development of the market to a world market, which causes money to develop into world money and abstract labour into social labour. Abstract wealth, value, money, hence abstract labour, develop in the measure that concrete labour becomes a totality of different modes of labour embracing the world market' (Marx, 1975[1862]: 253). In the sense that Marx describes things here, the world market is, like Lefebvre's 'urban', an actual reality and a concept of reality. The world market and the urban are real enough, vital necessities for the reproduction of capitalism on an expanded scale; both are embodied in nameable people, in living agents and actual economic practices, in institutions and organizations; both are a vast web of exchange relations based around money and capital and culture. Yet, at the same time, both should be conceived as fluid processes circulating around the globe; both flow as non-observable phenomena, too.

Another way in which we might frame 'the urban' is actually the way Spinoza conceived substance in Part I of *Ethics*. Substance, for Spinoza, is the very essence of nature and reality, its bedrock content, indivisible in itself and only perceivable and conceivable through its manifold and manyfold *attributes*. Each attribute, says Spinoza (1993: 9), 'expresses the reality or being of the substance'. Substance is, of course, Spinoza's pantheistic theory of God, his notion that God is immanent in all reality, including ourselves; but maybe the form of this notion holds, too, for the immanent nature of the urban, for its complex ontological tissuing, for the fabric that now clothes our daily lives. What is being affirmed here is the urban as a single, indivisible substance whose attributes — the built environment, transport infrastructure, population densities, topographical features, social mixes, political governance — are all the formal *expressions* of what pervades it ontologically. These attributes, in short, are how the urban looks and how it can be seen and known.

Like the giant drip canvases of Jackson Pollock, and the fractals his art is meant to represent, there is chaos to these attributes yet underlying order to its substance, to *the* substance, to the underlying urban structure. If Cubist art captured the relativizing tendencies and contortions of an emergent urban space, the spontaneous flowing skeins and explosive nebulae of Pollock's late Abstract Expressionism offer pictorial representations of the formless form of planetary urbanization. It is often said of Pollock's mural-size drip paintings, especially those completed between 1947 and 1950, that they give the impression of infinite expandability, an experiential feeling of

expansion and enlargement, a volatile dynamism that seems to want to break free of its own borders (Cernuschi and Herczynski, 2007). As Pollock himself was wont to claim, 'here there's no center, no beginning, no middle or end'; entering necessitates a daring leap onto a moving train, not knowing quite where it is headed, only having a vague sense of where it has been. 'Unframed space' is how Pollock's widow, artist Lee Krasner, described these paintings; boundless kinetic energy, chaotic and dense processes of high complexity containing an almost hidden scaling order — just like contemporary urbanization.

Pollock's skeins and swirls, spirals and drips are often so intense, so dense, that they engulf the whole canvas; there is no space left, little daylight between buildings and roads, no more developable canvas surface. The imagery is electrodynamic, hydraulic and energetic, and somehow quintessentially urban. What is equally significant here is how this perspective evokes what Clement Greenberg (1961) called 'the crisis of the easel picture', the crisis of the classic framing — maybe the classic framing of the city. Greenberg's intent was to affirm the de-centred, polyphonic picture, one that did away with an upright viewpoint and dispensed with any beginning, middle and end. Greenberg (1961: 155) invoked a principal ingredient: 'fatal ambiguity'.

Chaos and repetition cohere in free-flowing composition, mimicking the flows of capital unleashed in the deregulated world market. Flows of investment that produce space, that seemingly have the same vital, spontaneous energy of a Pollock loop, power the 'secondary circuit' of capital into real estate, a circuit of investment that formerly ran parallel to the 'primary circuit' of capital, to industrial production, but which now, Lefebvre says, has grown to be relatively more important in the overall global economy (2003: 159). The secondary circuit flows as fixed and usually immovable capital, such as office blocks and transport infrastructure, roads and warehouses, marinas and apartment complexes, a whole built investment for production and consumption, all of which has its value imprisoned in space and cannot be devalued without immanent destruction (see Harvey, 1982).

The secondary circuit was once a 'buffer' against crisis, says Lefebvre (2003: 159); now we know that it is the mainstay of a global and increasingly planetary urban economy, one of the principal sources of capital investment, and hence over the past 15 to 20 years the medium and product of a worldwide real-estate boom. But the secondary circuit is a source of new instabilities and problems, too, particularly when it gets lubricated by financial (fictitious) capital and underwritten by the state. In the early 1970s, Lefebvre said this secondary circuit got caught up in the 'consensual' politics of state neomanagerialist bureaucrats negotiating with a new species of entrepreneurial private-sector neoliberals. In the 1980s, the neoliberal paradigm foisted themes of growth, productivity and competitivity upon the dominant political-economic ideology, running roughshod over concerns for equality, democracy and social justice. Transnational monopoly capital began to gobble everything up everywhere in order to increase value-added and accumulate capital. Capital danced to the same frantic beat that Marx sketched in his *Manifesto*. The explosion of urban growth has consequently been a process of uneven development, of homogeneity and fragmentation. Rural places and suburban spaces have become integral moments of neoindustrial production and financial speculation, becoming absorbed and being reconfigured into new world-regional zones of exploitation, into megalopolitan regional systems, a phenomenon that swallowed up old-style city-forms, too, as urbanization shed its skin and corroded its shell.

Never before — even more than in Lefebvre's day — has the urban process been so bound up with finance capital and with the caprices of the world's financial markets. The global urbanization boom, with its seemingly insatiable flows into the secondary circuit of capital, has depended on the creation of new mechanisms to wheel and deal fictitious capital and credit money, on new deregulated devices for legalized looting and finagling, for asset stripping and absorbing surplus capital into the built environment. David Harvey (2003) neatly labels all this 'accumulation by dispossession', upgrading and

updating Marx's theory of 'primitive accumulation', mobilizing it in a twenty-first-century neoliberal context. Accumulation by dispossession signals other fresh terrains for speculation and market expansion: asset-stripping through mergers and acquisitions, raiding of pension funds, biopiracy, privatization of hitherto common assets such as water and other public utilities, and the general pillaging of hitherto publicly owned property. Baron Haussmann once tore into central Paris, into its old neighbourhoods and poor populations, dispatching the latter to the periphery while speculating on the centre; the built urban form simultaneously became a property machine and a means to divide and rule; today, neo-Haussmannization, in a similar process that integrates financial, corporate and state interests, tears into the globe, sequesters land through forcible slum clearance and eminent domain, valorizing it while banishing former residents to the global hinterlands of post-industrial malaise.

## Separation and encounters: 'the urban consolidates'

Such universalizing tendencies based on market relations create unification and integration, positive, dynamic energy and the creative power of attraction and incorporation; yet, as in all particle physics, there is negative energy, too: repulsion, minus charges, generating a dialectical force field in which centres oppose peripheries. The demarcation is no longer a definitive split between strict opposites; nor is it any simple urban-rural, North-South divide. Rather separation, Lefebvre would have it, is *immanent* within the accumulation of capital itself, *immanent* within its secondary circuit of capital. 'In this case', he says, 'the frontier line doesn't pass between the city and the country, *but is within the interior of the phenomenon of the urban*, between a dominated periphery and a dominating center' (1970: 152, emphasis added).

Separation and segregation are social realities that Lefebvre hates. They are the enemy of urbanization, he says, 'the enemy of assemblies and encounters' (2003[1970])]), profoundly anti-urban impulses, enemies of what his own potted definition of 'the urban' is: centrality in space, assembly in space, encounters in space, a dense and differential social space. Separation 'breaks the unifying power of urban form' (*ibid*.: 124). But the dialectical form of the urban is, of course, that it is formless, formless because urbanization tends to break any limits that try to circumscribe its own form. It is like trying to know, with certainty, both the movement and position of a subatomic particle, both its wave and particle characteristic — the paradox between process and product, between movement and outcome, between urbanization and the urban. However, at the same time, there is, strangely, a form of sorts to the urban — even if that form is empty in itself: it is always relative form, floating form, contingent and uncertain form, only becoming real, only beginning to define itself ontologically when the urban is filled by a certain notion of proximity, by people and activity, by events coming together in this proximity, creating concentration and simultaneity, as well as density and intensity.

This is doubtlessly why the idea of 'urban fabric' or 'urban tissue' is such powerful imagery, so suggestive a terminology. With it, we can begin — or should be able to begin — to grasp the urban as organic tissue, as fine-grained texturing, as a mosaic and fractal form that has some delicate content, some feel to it, something we can touch and manipulate in our own conceptual hands, think feelingly, as it were. We know when it is there — and when it is not. The urban creates nothing, is nothing, serves no purpose and has no reality *outside* of a human reality, outside of exchange, outside of union, outside of human proximity, human concentration and human encounter. 'The signs of the urban', Lefebvre says, 'are signs of assembly: the things that promote assembly (the street and its surface, stone, asphalt, sidewalks) and the requirements for assembly (seats, lights)' (2003: 118). The urban is, he says:

> pure form: a place of encounter, assembly, simultaneity. This form has no specific content, but is a centre of attraction and life. It is an abstraction, but unlike a metaphysical entity, the urban is a concrete abstraction, associated with practice. Living creatures, the products of industry,

technology and wealth, works of culture, ways of living, situations, the modulations and ruptures of the everyday — the urban accumulates all content. But it is more than and different from accumulation. Its content (things, objects, people, situations) are mutually exclusive because they are diverse, but inclusive because they are brought together and imply their mutual presence. The urban is both form and receptacle, void and plenitude, superobject and nonobject, superconconsciousness and the totality of consciousness (*ibid*.: 118–19).

Few, perhaps, have so beautifully defined something so indefinable.

The urban is nothing in itself, nothing outside dynamic social relations, a coming together of people. As long as human beings can come together, as long as separation can be resisted, there is always a possibility of *encounters* between people. We must offset separation, Lefebvre insists, separation between people and things; we must overcome the obstacles that promote opacity of relationships, that restrict separated particularities coursing around in prefabricated space. In *The Urban Revolution* (2003[1970]: 174), Lefebvre uses another beautiful turn of phrase: *l'urbain rassemble* (the urban consolidates). The urban brings everything together, and transforms everything in that coming together: capital and goods, people and information, activity and conflict, confrontation and cooperation. The urban concentrates things, intensifies, creates simultaneity and difference, creates difference where no awareness of difference existed; ditto what was once distinct and isolated becomes conscious of its own universality in that particularity. The urban consolidates: it is both particle and wave, flow and thing; its own random uncertainty principle that prevails in everyday life. Yet if we follow Lefebvre's own premise about urban society, about urban reality, the more urbanization continues to carpet over the whole world, the more encounters are likely to take place, and the more a *politics of the encounter* will punctuate and define our urban landscape of the future.

The urban is not the passive surface over which people encounter other people: the sheer proximity of people to other people, the sheer simultaneity of activities, of events and chance meetings *is the very definition of the urban itself*. In encountering one another, people produce space, urban space; they become urban people, Lefebvre says, 'polyvalent, poly-sensorial, capable of complex and transparent relationships with the "world"' (1968: 110). Density intensifies the capacity for encounters, and encounters intensify the capacity of that density. This is a shifting conjoining of people, a kind of kaleidoscope in floating space, a spatial kaleidoscope, one that has little to do with absolute location. It is an understanding, too, that problematizes the right to the city (Merrifield, 2011a; Merrifield, forthcoming, 2013): right to *what* city? If urbanization is planetary, if the urban — and urban society — is everywhere, does this mean the right to the metropolitan region, the whole urban agglomeration? Does it still make sense to talk about the right to the city, as if this is something monocentric and clear-cut? The city is dead, classical humanism is dead, Lefebvre announces, gleefully, provokingly; but the urban persists, he says, grows and grows, as does the yearning for another sort of humanism, and for another sort of urban praxis.

So if the urban process is open-ended and if urbanization is global and boundless, any transformative politics presumably need to be likewise. If one loses the right to the city, then one gains a capacity to forge a politics based upon the encounter — a more free-floating, dynamic and relational militancy, to be sure, yet one perhaps more apt for our age of formless metropolitanization, one more attuned to a political landscape in which new social media can and have become subversive weaponry. In any politics of the encounter, the urban is a *place*, a site for action, not an actor itself; to see the urban as an actor is to fetishize the urban, is to fetishize space. As an 'it', the urban does nothing in itself; its role is that of a dynamic socio-spatial sphere in which the *betweenness* of people is ever so much more intense, ever so much more immediate and palpable, ever more likely to erupt should that social proximity and diversity, that concentration and simultaneity, elicit human bonding or human breakdown. Almost always will meaningful encounters comprise the construction of use values as opposed to the appropriation of

exchange values; and almost always will meaningful encounters unfurl on streets that now internalize the world, streets that we can rename *world market streets*, urban streets that express a fragile planetary ecology as well as a rapacious global economy.

We have witnessed the politics of the encounter on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Athens, and Madrid — and in Manhattan, with Occupy Wall Street protests. In all these instances, encounters unfold in the heart of 'the city', yet the stakes of organization and protest are not about the city per se; rather, they are something about *democracy*, in conditions of capitalist crisis, something more vast and simple than the city as we once knew it, ensembles of bodies, hastened together by digital media such as Facebook and Twitter. The Occupy Wall Street movement began in September 2011, when a handful of dogged activists ventured to the centre of America's financial universe, justifiably griping about growing income inequality and the stranglehold of big money and corporations over US democracy. The turnout was small and its impact initially disappointing. But within a month, amazingly, a social movement was taking hold, and gathering strength and numbers; the protest suddenly captured popular imagination — not only of ordinary Americans, but of disaffected people worldwide.

Encamped in Lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park, thousands of demonstrators began organizing themselves without organizations or leaders. An online global 'conversation', mobilizing favourable public opinion, soon grew as offline street protests; inspired by 'Arab Spring' uprisings, it took place across the planet: not only in New York but in Los Angeles, Madrid, Rome, Stockholm, Lisbon, London, Sarajevo, Hong Kong, Berlin, Athens and Sydney (the list is in no way exhaustive). In the process, demonstrators everywhere have revealed themselves and shown to the world that masses of young and old people share the same sense of frustration and rage. Along the way, *indignados* have discovered their own numbers: 'We-are-the-99-percent!' Participants have simultaneously acted and reacted, been both affected and affecting; joy and celebration, tenderness and abandon, online and offline activism, all have found structuring, all somehow find definition.

## Centrality and citizenship: here comes everybody?

Toward the end of his life, Lefebvre suggested that 'the right to the city', as a proverbial 'cry and demand', 'implies nothing less than a new revolutionary conception of citizenship' (Lefebvre, 1989: 17; *cf*. Lefebvre *et al*., 1985). Typically, Lefebvre never tells us what he means by 'revolutionary citizenship'. Yet we might infer today that revolutionary citizenship has to imply something other than the right to the city, which is too inward-looking in its political expressiveness. Citizenship must be conceived as something *urban*, as something territorial, yet one in which this territoriality is narrower and broader than both 'city' and 'nationality'; a citizen of the block and neighbourhood becomes a citizen of the world, a universal citizen rooted in place, encountering fellow citizens across the corridor and at the other end of the planet. Urbanization makes this sense of belonging possible, makes it both broader and narrower, even as it sometimes rips up the foundation of one's own dwelling space.

This kind of citizenship is one in which *perception* replaces passport and *horizon* becomes almost as important as habitat. This perception is simultaneously in place and in space, offline somewhere local, and online somewhere planetary, somewhere virtual. If we want to call this perception a newly formulated cognitive map in our heads, we can (*cf*. Jameson, 1984). What is important in this mapping is that it maps the totality, that it works when people see these two realms coming together, when perception (as a structure of feeling) and horizon (as a way of seeing) conjoin, somehow meet one another, *encounter* one another, suddenly give rise to a singular political awareness, to a potential political citizenship.

The politics of the encounter are not about the right to the city. In the right to the city, politics hold that there is still something solid to reclaim, to have a right over, like the

Communards reclaiming central Paris when there was a clear-cut centre. The politics of
the encounter hinge upon another conception of *centrality*: centrality is not necessarily
about being at the centre of things; it does not imply some absolute centre,
geographically located in absolute space, but is a locus of actions that attract and repel,
that structure and organize a social space, that define the urban. Centrality is not the way
Lefebvre once defined it in *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968), as an absolute centre of a city that
needs taking back; urban politics cannot invoke that model anymore. Instead, centrality
is something that is the cell form of the urban, it is atomic structuring, its *sine qua non*.

Centrality is crucial to any politics of encounter because it is through the encounter
that centrality unfolds; this, in turn, flips back dialectically because centrality then makes
more encounters possible. Centrality calls out for content, for people and acts, for
situations and practical relationships. It implies a simultaneity, a simultaneity of
everything that comes together in a social act at a point, around that *node*, and at a certain
time. Centrality is movable, always relative, never fixed, always in a state of constant
mobilization and negotiation; sometimes it de-centres itself. Invariably, it requires
something more open, more *horizontal*. Here the encounter expresses an encounter
between people that has become an encounter between *citizens*, people who no longer
ask for their rights, for the rights of man, for the right to the city, for human rights: these
citizens meeting one another make no rights claims, posit no empty signifiers.[4] They
don't even speak — not in the conventional sense of the term; they just do, just act, affirm
themselves as a group, as a collectivity, as a 'general assembly', wanting to take back that
which has been dispossessed. They don't plead with or ask any interlocutor for anything
abstract, for they have little expectation of any rights, and don't want any rights granted.
If they say anything, citizens of the encounter, citizens of the occupation, speak a
language that the group has only just collectively invented.

Occupations as encounters in Zuccotti Park and at London's St. Paul's Cathedral
aren't hippie things, aren't like 1968; it would be a mistake to draw too many historical
parallels, other than that both movements drummed drums and sang joyous songs. Forget
1968: today's urban occupational politics are something radically new and different,
something fresher, more futuristic, electric rather than acoustic. The greatest difference
forty-odd years on are the *social media*: they change everything; all bets are now off, and,
indeed, all bets are very much now on. Social media change the *tactics*, the *tempo* and the
*terrain* of any activism — the three Ts. True, the protagonists are also young and usually
educated, sometimes super-educated; almost everywhere, a disproportionate percentage
of protestors hail from privileged groups from the highest rungs of society. And yet, for
these privileged, college-educated kids, an upending economy shows no signs of letting
them benefit from any rosy capitalistic future. Today's young activists form a loose
coterie of 'youth-interrupted', the careerless, prospectless, assetless generation — the
NINJA generation, as Gordon Gekko called them in Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street 2*: No
Income, No Jobs and Assets.

Yet they're wising up fast, knowing that they can no longer have any expectations, that
the reality of the *now* merits no expectations. What they have voiced is a broadly
anti-capitalist agenda, a systemic indignation. And participants gel because of affinity,

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4   The other tricky thing about 'rights' these days is how they underwrite a great deal of conservative
    policy about personal responsibility and individual freedom. Be it Tea Party or Tory Party, the Right
    on both sides of the Atlantic now defiantly champions rights, embraces their claims, peddles the
    right of (wealthy) citizens to challenge public service providers, to contest, opt out and attack any
    state action that is not in some way geared toward bolstering private enterprise. Even Lefebvre's
    sacred urban right figures in the mainstream's arsenal, re-appropriated and defanged in, for
    instance, the UN-Habitat's 2010 Charter and the World Bank's manifesto for addressing the ills of the
    global poverty trap. Meanwhile, the right to this and that has been proclaimed so frequently by
    radicals, from so many different walks of life, that the concept is now pretty much a political banality
    (Merrifield, 2011a).

because of a common identification, because they share and want to express common notions, about themselves and about their world. Meanwhile, the gelling takes hold quasi-anarchically as organization spreads out like a tentacle. Social media are central to helping all this come into play, come into being, into becoming, to helping transform a virtual presence into a physical presence; and vice versa. Citizens in the encounter comprise disparate groups of people who have an uncanny knack of engineering 'smart spontaneity', of creating encounters in the heat of the moment and in the heat of the movement. Like bourgeois production they arrange just-in-time rendezvous. Twitter and Facebook, mobile phones and SMS messaging, Blackberry BBM texting, have all collapsed space and diminished the time of organizing.

Social media enable groups to often punch above their weight, to mobilize the few while having the significant impact of the many. At the same time, anonymous minorities soon discover that they are not so anonymous and alone as they once thought, that others who are like them are out there, too, are everywhere, and that they are actually an emergent majority, one in the making, one making itself; if not a 'Here Comes Everybody' then certainly a 'Here Comes Every*buddy*' (Merrifield, 2011b). The pun is James Joyce's, from *Finnegans Wake*, seemingly giving the nod to Facebook addicts everywhere, to the millions upon millions who now cohere as a sort of 'mega-underground' (Wasik, 2012). What is significant about this 'mega-underground' is that its virtual reality has revealed itself in actual material reality, on the ground somewhere, in the formation of face-to-face groups, in the formation of crowds of occupiers, stepping out of the shadows. A disconnected group is now getting connected, a mega-underground casting off its invisibility to embody itself in physical space.

The tactics of this movement, as well as the tempo of its dynamics, of its ebbing and flowing and crowd coalescence, of its just-in-time activism, create a new terrain of struggle, different from the streets of Paris in the 1960s, different from the campus revolts, different from the barricade-building of old. Just as it is silly to think that revolutions are realized online, it is almost as silly to underplay how strong-tie and weak-link politics nourish each other. In a sense, together, they create a new time and space of protest; the temporal aspect is perhaps obvious, the spatial perhaps not. Indeed, this new space is a space neither rooted in place nor circulating in space, but rather one inseparable combination of the two, an insuperable unity that we might describe as urban: an abstraction becoming concrete, the concrete becoming abstract.

But squares like Tahrir in Cairo or Zuccotti Park in Manhattan are urban public spaces not for reason of their pure concrete physicality, but because they are meeting places between virtual and physical worlds, between online and offline conversations, between online and offline encounters. That is why they are public: because they enable public discourses, public conversations to talk and meet each other, quite literally. They are public not because they are simply there, in the open, in a city centre, but because these spaces are made public by people encountering one another, there. The efficacy of these spaces for any global movement is defined by what is going on both inside and outside these spaces, by the here and the there, by what is taking place in them and how this taking place is greeted outside them, by the rest of the world, how it inspires the rest of the world, how it communicates with the rest of the world, how it becomes the rest of the world. The relationship can only ever be reciprocal, the inside and the outside, the here and the there, the absence and the presence.

The occupation dramatizes the necessarily expansive nature of revolt against planetary capitalism, drawing the outside within itself while enlarging its own sphere of activity, propelling it onto the outside. From this standpoint, the question of geography is now tantamount to the question of teleportation, of being here and there at once, or almost at once, of absences as much as presences, of particles and waves expressing their specific, dynamic complementarity. As such, the stake of protest is not strictly the city nor even the urban; yet perhaps, just perhaps, there is something about contemporary planetary urban society that enables these protests to be made, that permits and engenders such a definition of protest, a definition in which people collectively can now

express themselves publicly, encounter one another, and talk to one another, as citizens in front of the whole wide world.

This is a little how Henri Lefebvre might have conceived his notion of revolutionary citizenship had he still been with us today. At least this is how he *should* have conceived it. And if we can take leave where his *La Pensée Marxiste et la Ville* left off (see chapter 2 of Lefebvre, 1972), the complete urbanization of the world will continue to mean job cuts, deindustrialization, layoffs, downsizing and unemployment — the whole bit of contemporary work (and post-work) relations we recognize in our midst, the contextual reality for continued mega-underground occupational activism. Therein lie the threats and the promise of urban protest. Because as long as there is a *mob* constituency out there, making itself, encountering one another in public, there are reasons to be cheerful and relatively optimistic. As long as the enemy of encounter — segregation and separation — can be offset, the politics of the encounter will continue to be part and parcel of the process of planetary urbanization.

Perhaps the politics of the encounter really boil down to mobs of people encountering other mobs of people. In *Foundation* (1955), Asimov presents 'mob analysis' as the watchword for *psychohistory*, the brainchild of mathematician Hari Seldon, who formulates psychohistory to predict the future in statistical fashion. Rulers of Trantor became very interested in Seldon because they felt he could help make the future theirs; Seldon soon became one of the most important men in the galaxy and assumed the role of First Minister under Emperor Cleon I's rule. For the scientist Asimov (he had a PhD in chemistry), the concept of psychohistory was modelled on the kinetic theory of gases. Molecules making up gases move about in absolutely random fashion, in any direction, in three dimensions and at a wide range of speeds. Nobody can predict the behaviour of a single molecule. Yet, as a mass of molecules, as gases, you can somehow describe what the motions would be on average, and from there work out the gas laws with an enormous degree of predictability.

Asimov applied this notion to human beings. (In Asimov's *Foundation* books, there is no alien presence, no non-human life, save human-made robots: his vision of the universe is all the more interesting because it is all too human.) All of us have free will, all of us as individuals exhibit behaviour and act in ways that defy predictability. Still, for vast numbers of people, for diverse societies, for 'mobs' of people, Asimov's Seldon suggests that some sort of predictability is possible, as for gases. Thus psychohistory is 'mob analysis', predicting mob behaviour as intruding, intervening in historical contingency. The politics of mobs, then, are like the kinetic theory of gases, and the idea has considerable salience because it suggests something about the prospect of group encounters intervening in the historical-geographical logic of urbanization, intervening in a world without work or cities. Although here, perhaps, it is not so much psychohistory as *psychogeography* that is more akin to mob analysis, implying any act of centralizing human behaviour, any human agglomeration, is likely to create at a certain time and in a certain space a gathering of people that resembles a gathering of gases, a certain coming together of movement and stasis, of particle and wave. This encounter will possess its own kinetic energy; sometimes negative energy, like indiscriminate rioting (British cities witnessed this not so long ago), but also positive energy, its own Brownian motion, perhaps generating an energy that is enough to alter the course of history (and geography).

Should such an encounter really take hold, really gel, the social configuration would be a kind of political superstring theory realizing itself, a transformative conjoining around a collective *boson*. Like particle physicists today, we know, theoretically and mathematically from our radical hypotheses, that this collective reality exists, even if we have never yet witnessed it empirically. We are 99% sure that the figures stack up, that those in the boson will be the 99%. If that ever happens — when it happens — we will see before our eyes a beautiful *collideorscape* (the portmanteau is also Joyce's, from *Finnegans Wake*, 1976[1939]: 143), a 'collision and escape', a kaleidoscope of sorts, a passage into another political reality.

What might this *collideorscape* resemble? Once again, the imagery, the pictorial representation of resistance, the sight of a politics of the encounter unfolding in our mind's eye, might come from abstract expressionism, from Jackson Pollock, from his 1950s canvas entitled Number 32, which currently hangs in Düsseldorf's Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen museum. Pollock's patterning depicts the very act of *fusion*, of people becoming what Sartre (1976) called a *le groupe en fusion* (fused group). Only two colours make up Pollock's masterpiece Number 32: a light tan-coloured canvas brown over which are splattered skeins of jet-black swirls. One is struck by the energy that radiates from this composition; if you verge too close, it sucks you into its spiralling vortex. Energy enters via thin whirls and curves, thin threads of spontaneous black. Yet there are points of convergence, snowflakes and dendrites, where the black paint thickens and is nodal, highly charged. Modest inputs spiralling inwards seem, at these points of fusion, about to release enormous outputs, energy that pushes outwards, a diffusion unleashing a quantity–quality reaction, a critical mass of power. They kindle radical eruptions, not random explosions, volcanic happenings rather than unannounced anarchy, because here there's underlying regularity, some inner structuring order. For in this imagery we not only glimpse radical fractals, attributes of Spinozian urban substance, but also the physicists' concept of *wormhole* coming to life, illusive shortcuts, tiny trails toward liberation (*cf.* Greene, 2000: 264–65).

Wormholes create new regions of planetary urban space, blaze new spatial territories, a new political space–time dimension that secretly links, makes a bridge, or subterranean tunnel, between social movements everywhere. Wormholes complete the encounter, transmit *messenger particles* that unite all struggles across the planet. Charged particles, as I've said, transmit negative, repulsive energy, frequently telling other particles to 'move apart'; yet every particle also has an opposite charge, has powers of attraction that say 'come together'. In our contemporary, ever-expanding urban universe, little loops of energy generate incredible force; they literally make the world go around, light it up with electricity. It is time for political struggles to really energize this new planetary charge, and to convert it into unprecedented cosmic singularity — into a new *concrete* expressionism.

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