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# Debates

## Amateur urbanism

Andy Merrifield

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*Professionals and wannabe professionals are everywhere in urban studies today, everywhere in the exclusive running and ruining of cities, everywhere in the control of urban economies, everywhere in austerity drives, everywhere in think tanks and institutions who study cities, everywhere mass media have a say about cities, everywhere the grant money flows, the payroll beckons and the spotlight shines. The biggest problem this professionalism poses for any urban dissenter—for people I shall call amateurs—is representation. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation, into a representation done for and by professionals. And professionals brook no dissent. Professionals are realists; everybody else lives in cloud-cuckoo-land. This paper stakes out its terrain in cloud-cuckoo-land and explores the nemesis of professionalised urbanism: amateur urbanism, an urban knowledge and practice not on anybody's payroll, a passionate labour of love.*

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**Key words:** amateurs, professionals, Edward Said, Guy Debord, urban knowledge and practice, dissent, ambiguity

‘Our era of technicians makes abundant use of the nominalised adjective “professional”: it seems to believe that therein lies some kind of guarantee.’ (Guy Debord 1991)

**S**peculating on our urban future—especially on a Left urban future—is something you get slammed for these days. ‘They’ tell you you’re writing fiction. At first, I put this down to the shortcomings of academic social science: you know, to its inability to think outside an increasingly airtight university box, its problem of engaging with anything futuristic, a mania for sticking tight to Hume’s Law: ‘you can’t have an ought from an is’. Each time you project urban reality into the realm of the yet-to-be, into the political what-should-be, highlighting participatory democracy, bottom-up development, it’s as if you’re

**blowing in the wind, not standing on solid analytical ground.**

It’s sad how low the bar is set, how unambitious and unimaginative the academy is these days with its urban knowledge production, keeping its thoughts within the narrow confines of academic specialisation and arcane professional journals, retreating inwards or becoming servile, a mere handmaiden of power. The dominance of the positivist–empiricist tradition has something to do with this, predictable perhaps in our age of ‘experts’, in an era some describe as ‘post-political’ (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Positivism has always hidden behind the shield of quantification and ‘objectivity’, always tried to rid itself of politics; now, it’s reinvented itself as a convenient methodological foil for technocrats trying to find consensus without conflict, gaining grants

without upsetting anyone. Their opinions are neutral, right? Their objective knowledge isn't value-laden. Yours, if it's critical and partisan, is warped, ideological; worse, fantasy.

After a while, though, I realised this wasn't the only thing at stake. There's something else going on, too. Indeed, if you look around today there are plenty of scholars prophesying our urban future; they're doing it almost everywhere, conceiving all kinds of smart city plans and grand normative paradigms, founding centres galore for liveable futures and what not; the list goes on and on. The catch, of course, is that you can speculate to your heart's content so long as your future might be absorbed *within* the status quo, or else puts a different spin on that status quo, makes that status quo grow even more wealthy. If you can do that then your future is realistic—permissible not dismissible, even achievable. Above all, technocratic futures are OK, as are grandiose master plans that involve lots of high-tech urban design stuff—lots of *corporate* high-tech urban design stuff—ones endorsed by some billionaire and administered by a patented scientific corporation and global information-technology company. Architecturally driven futures are fine as well, those manufacturing the city of forms, in sleek glass, spanking new edifices conceived by Frank Gehry or Renzo Piano or Rem Koolhaas—'starchitects'—and endorsed by real estate professionals and civic boosterists.

All this got me thinking recently about the late Edward Said, about his BBC Radio 4 Reith Lectures from the early 1990s, on the role of amateur and professional intellectuals in knowledge production, about how one speaks truth *to* power while the other speaks the truth *of* power. I won't easily forget Said discoursing across the airwaves, inspiring intellectuals—and budding intellectuals (as I was then)—to reflect upon our craft and political engagement. Hearing him was a big learning curve for me; not because I was necessarily learning something new; more because I was learning how to frame what I

already knew, and what I might learn in the future. I'd actually seen Said in person, at Oxford, in its Sheldonian Theatre, a little while before he gave those radio lectures. A packed house saw him present a dress rehearsal of his Reith thesis on the 'representation of intellectuals'.<sup>1</sup>

I was a graduate student in those days, writing up a PhD with David Harvey on 'The Dialectics of Urban Space', tussling with my own inner dialectic: a working-class kid from Liverpool immersed in a world of Oxford professionals, upper class professionals, who talked a lot different from the way I talked—still talk a lot different from the way I talk. In that epoch, I considered myself very much a dedicated amateur—a dedicated amateur urbanist. Moreover, after tuning into Said at the Sheldonian, after hearing him on the radio, imbibing what he said, I was damn sure I'd remain so. I like to think I've been true to myself ever since; it's been well over a decade since I was on anybody's payroll, following the straight and narrow, selling myself over to a world of professionalised academia.<sup>2</sup>

In accepted wisdom, we tend to think of amateurs as people who dabble, who don't do things for a living but who do something as a hobby, at weekends, in their spare time. We see amateurs as less accomplished than professionals. But professionalism, said Said, often constitutes a form of compliant behaviour, of making yourself marketable and presentable to the powers that be. This isn't to deny the need for competence, for being conscientious about what you do and for having the right skills to do it. Not anyone can do heart surgery or pilot a plane, teach kids or cure animals. It involves training and learning. So it's not the skills question that concerned Said; it's more professional practice, how you employ those skills, to whom you sell them, how you apply your knowledge, *in whose interests you're acting*. Pros aren't usually controversial; they're on the payroll, they're there to provide a service. Professionalism means having an expertise to hide behind (you're an expert so you know

everything), an often narrow expertise, as well as an esoteric language that sets you apart, that gains entry into exclusive professional bodies, one strictly off limits to rank amateurs.

Amateurs, by contrast, aren't moved by profit or pay; they usually care more about ideas and values not tied down to any profession; their vision is often more expansive, more eclectic, not hampered by the conservatism of narrow expertise, preoccupied as it is with defending one's intellectual turf. To be an amateur is to express the ancient French word: *love of*, a person who engages on an unpaid basis, a non-specialist, a layperson. Nothing pejorative intended. Amateurs sometimes care for ideas that question professional authority because they express concerns professionals don't consider, don't see, don't care about. Thus, an amateur might likely be somebody who rocks the boat, who does stir up trouble, because he or she isn't on anybody's payroll—never will be on the payroll because of the critical things they say. In this sense, an intellectual ought to be an amateur, Said insisted, a thinking and concerned member of a society who raises questions at the very heart of even the most professionalised activity. Still, the issue for amateurs today is how to deal with the flagrant professionalism in our midst—in urban studies, in urban life, everywhere?

Professionals and wannabe professionals are everywhere in urban studies, everywhere in the exclusive running (and ruining) of cities, everywhere in the control of urban economies, in mayors' imagination, everywhere in think tanks and institutions who study cities (especially in right-leaning, lavishly funded ones), everywhere mass media have a say about cities, everywhere in the thinking (and non-thinking) about cities, everyplace where the grant money flows, the payroll beckons, the spotlight shines, everyplace where you plead for the poor while placating the rich. We know, too, how university academics and their bosses desperately want a piece of this professional action, of this lover's embrace with

*corporatism*, of offshore educational franchising, of lucrative consultancies and creative city enterprises, of the professional branding of your centre, of your 'Urban Age' programme, of Deutsche Bank at the London School of Economics. Nice work if you can get it! Only professionals get a look in, get promoted to Urban Chairs of this and that, hence every academic—well, almost every academic—wants to be a pro, a pro with brio.

Pros with brio also tend to be *triumphalist* pros. Triumphalism is part and parcel of the professionalisation of urban studies, of professionals patting themselves on the back, of professionals' self-congratulatory boosterism, boosting themselves as much as the cities they boost. Key source is Edward Glaeser's (2011) *Triumph of the City*. Amongst all its hype about 'global cities' as engines of economic growth, as economic 'triumphs' to be extolled, nothing is said about how the world's biggest metropolises have economies predicated on parasitic activities. The triumph of the city is that it has triumphantly become an arena for rabidly extorting land rent, of making land pay anyway it can, of dispatching non-parasitic and non-rent-maximising activities to some other part of town. And with this economic triumphalism comes political triumphalism; another key source is Benjamin Barber's (2013) *If Mayors Ruled the World*. Since cities command the towering heights of the global economy, what better thing to do than get mayors to control this global economy. Local executives like Michael Bloomberg, says Barber, run things in a 'non-partisan' professional manner, with a no-nonsense pragmatic style. This gets things done. If city chief execs pool their expertise they can save us at the global scale. Thank heavens for small professional miracles.

One of the biggest problems this professionalism poses for us amateurs is *representation*. It's as if only professionals can represent themselves; everybody else needs to be represented. It's professionals who prop up representative democracy, who represent real knowledge, who're bearers of

absolute urban truths, who instigate urban triumphs. Everything that was directly lived has now moved away into a representation, into a representation done for and by professionals, done from above and foisted downwards on us. Now, it's professionals who know best. Professional accountants and bankers know best about affecting economic policy, about good government and urban governance, about knowing the economic facts of austerity. And professionals brook no dissent, particularly from dissenting amateurs, from people who don't operate on 'objective' facts, but are riven with disturbing and destabilising subjective sentiments. Professionals are realists; everybody else lives in cloud-cuckoo-land.

The annals of professionals knowing best are blood stained in urban history. We've had all sorts of ideas imposed on peoples' lives from above, all kinds of paradigms that go from professional boardrooms to somebody's draughty living room, if they're lucky enough to have a living room. In 1967, for example, Roger Starr published *Urban Choices: The City and its Critics*, a series of influential essays that framed urban issues very much from the professional's standpoint. The book is revealing for the scorn heaped on 'well-intentioned amateurs' [*sic*], as Starr responds to 'the hundred critics' who dared question professional urbanists—city officials, planners and architects, private developers, realtors and of course Roger Starr himself. His roster of interferers reads like a Who's Who of popular urbanists: Jane Jacobs, Saul Alinsky, Lewis Mumford, Ada Louise Huxtable, William H. Whyte, Herbert Gans. Interestingly, Starr himself was on the real estate payroll. At the time he was 'Executive Director' of New York Citizens' Housing and Planning Council, a mist-enveloped ideological veil for his reactionary activities. Loaded New York real estate interests bankrolled this bogus and misleading organisation, which still exists (and still has little to do with real citizens). Meanwhile, Starr was given a loud megaphone to voice his

dubious ideas: he was 'Urban Affairs' commentator at the *New York Times*.

Starr was in serious disagreement with Jane Jacobs, perhaps our greatest amateur urbanist, someone who famously stood up to that most formidable pro, Robert Moses. Starr can't quite address Jacobs on equal terms; she's framed as a desperate housewife: 'Critics of the American City', says Starr (1967),

'have been talking to it as a nagging wife addresses her drinking husband—in sublime confidence that the victim suffers from a simple disease, requiring only a simple remedy. If only, says the wife, you could stay away from that first highball when you leave the office ... If only, Jacobs tells the city [her husband], you didn't hang out with those nasty city planners, and left yourself alone ... You ought to take up a nice constructive hobby, like gardening, without artificial fertilisers.'<sup>3</sup>

The same (male) hubris, we might remember, was also directed at another rank amateur of Jacobs' generation: Rachel Carson, arch-defender of the countryside, whose plight was similarly under assault from post-war corporate forces at large, intent on business. Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring* became the sisterly companion to Jacobs' (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published within a couple of years of one another. Just as professional planners tried to discredit housewife Jacobs, so too did professional scientists (bankrolled by the chemical industry) try to discredit housewife Carson. Professional pesticides were killing our countryside as well as our cities.

The plot thickened in the 1970s: Roger Starr became New York City's Housing Commissioner and in 1976 masterminded a national programme that followed directly from his earlier representations of urban reality: **PLANNED SHRINKAGE**. Planned Shrinkage became the received professional wisdom of Federal government's urban policy: the purposeful running down of blighted neighbourhoods, of those seen

as no longer economically ‘viable’, as too costly and too much of a Federal burden to save. ‘Shrinkage’ was a cover for *elimination*, for the deliberately masterminded destruction of ‘bad’ communities across America. Bad because pros said so, apparently proved so. To bolster Planned Shrinkage, Roger Starr peddled Rand Institute data, manipulated and doctored data as it happened, the pure pseudo-science of the right-wing think tank’s political leanings, unsurprising given it was part of the Rand Corporation’s empire. Rand used statistical systems analysis far too complicated for the average amateur citizen to understand; alas, it was often far too complicated for the Rand Institute to comprehend as well, so they decided to cut corners, make assumptions that came from no other proven source than Rand scientists’ own heads.

The whole professional ‘logic’ of Starr and Rand’s Planned Shrinkage was scientifically baseless and purely politically motivated, a ruling class war against costly public services; it signalled the beginnings of the hatchet job that neocons Reagan and Thatcher would soon wage, soon make their own. Indeed, in 1980s Britain, the Tories leapt on the bandwagon, recycling Planned Shrinkage in Liverpool after the 1981 Toxteth riots. Thatcher’s Chancellor Geoffrey Howe—now Lord Howe—thought Liverpool a lost cause. He even schemed spending cuts under so-called ‘Managed Decline’. The Howe revelation only became public in 2011, under the 30-year ruling, which allows general access to National Archive files and Cabinet minutes. At the time, Howe was opposed to Secretary of State for Environment Michael Heseltine’s proposal for a regeneration fund to rebuild Liverpool’s ruins and riot-hit communities, believing it a waste of government money. ‘I cannot help feeling’, Howe said, ‘that the option of *Managed Decline* is one which we should not forget altogether. We must not expend all our limited resources trying to make water flow uphill.’

Fast forward to today: consider the historical lineage between Planned Shrinkage and

the frenzied pursuit for ‘austerity’. Planned Shrinkage and austerity have two common characteristics. First is an overriding goal to run down and/or plunder the public sector, to make ‘unproductive’ public services productive for vested unproductive interests—you know, for financial parasites on the make. Second, both policies justify their programmes though made-up ‘evidence’. For austerity, just as for Planned Shrinkage, economists are the redoubtable professional voice of authority. Recently, the Harvard economic duo of Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff (2010) published ‘Growth in a Time of Debt’ in the *American Economic Review*, saying economic slump is the right time to slash public spending. Nations with a public debt burden of more than 90% of their gross domestic product (GDP), Reinhart and Rogoff say, will experience withered growth and economic stagnation.

To prevent this, debt must be purged—*public* debt Reinhart and Rogoff mean. When crisis hits and hurts, rather than recommend state spending to support needy people, Reinhart and Rogoff invoke data to authorise further public sector downsizing. Alas, this data has been picked apart, shown to be spurious by a smart graduate student, emphasising how the entire basis of Reinhart and Rogoff’s article, as well as austerity’s received wisdom, is utterly without foundation (Pollin and Ash 2013). But, like Nassau W. Senior’s ‘last hour’ from the 19th century (satirised by Marx in *Capital*<sup>4</sup>), who cares if it’s spurious and unfounded: the 90% claim has been music to the ears of ruling class professionals, to austerity honchos, to figures like Paul Ryan, the former Chairman of the US House Budget Committee, and to Olli Rehn, a top economic official at the European Commission. These guys believe anything, seize upon anything, only to justify their own biases and policies, only to favour creditors and bondholders over everybody else.

Henri Lefebvre wanted to counter this. He favoured a social theory constructed from the standpoint of amateurs, from the standpoint

of their everyday lives. Needless to say, pros like Roger Starr have everyday lives as well, and live (and die) in this same lived realm as all of us. But they function differently, play roles that affect ordinary people's everyday life in ways that are often detached from their own privileged everyday life. All of us somehow 'produce' space, Lefebvre (1991) says in *The Production of Space*, yet all of us don't produce space in the same way, or on the same terms, especially on the terms of those who have wealth and power. Professionals and powerful people envision *their* world, envision a world we're forced to inhabit. They have the power and wealth to make their own *abstract* conceptions into real-life representations, concrete and ideological manifestations; they make space subject to their own signs and codifications, to their own grandiose plans and world-historical paradigms.

These 'representations of space' may be 'abstract', conceived in professional business imaginations, in corporate boardrooms and at high-level consultations, but 'abstract' is misleading: there's nothing abstract here, nothing abstract in the sense of something purely conceptual, existing only in the mind. Their abstractions are deeply, troublingly *real*; they *really* are embodied in a space like the world market, embodied in glass and steel, in concrete, in social relations and institutions, in security zones, in assorted trade agreements, in the kind of vision of the world that gets schemed at places like Davos each year, at the World Economic Forum. Abstract space has very real social existence, just as interest rates and share prices on the stock market do; it finds a real objective expression in specific buildings and housing markets, in activities and modes of market intercourse over and through space, especially through urban space.

That's why it's so difficult for ordinary amateurs to work in the other direction: to abstract from everyday life and develop futuristic conceptions, politically shifting from the concrete to the abstract, and then back again to the concrete. Power begins on

an abstract plane and foists its conception down on us, in the concrete; it makes its abstractions concrete. Since we amateurs don't have that means or money, we must start concrete and try to scale upwards and outwards, try to realise our abstract renderings, our utopian and futuristic yearnings. In the process we frequently fail: we encounter barriers en route, political and economic obstacles that prevent this project getting generalised, like a socialist city trying to develop a socialist nation, or a socialist movement trying to create a socialist international.

One important item in an amateur's arsenal is surely *confrontation*, of being oppositional, of getting subversive, of not swallowing professional etiquette or soundbite, shrugging off professional ambition. Amateurs need courage; we need to fiercely guard our independence and resist professional domestication, immunise ourselves against professional lures, to being incorporated into the corporation, academic or otherwise. Remember one of Edward Said's amateur heroes—or rather amateur anti-heroes—Bazarov, from Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* (1862); Bazarov sets the tone, dictates a standard; he might be our conscience. Bazarov has a hard time with the mealy-mouthed elders of his day, with the liberals and reactionaries who tell you to respect the law and obey the current order of things. Bazarov embraces progressiveness, scoffs at mediocrity, assails clichés and would doubtless sneer at the professional spin you hear these days. Bazarov regards everything with scepticism, not taking fools gladly. He's at two with the world he's compelled to live in, never kowtowing to any authority. He's an unrelenting questioner, a devastatingly confrontational intellect, a dedicated dialectical amateur.

In fact, Bazarov is a lot like his alter ego a century on, Guy Debord, the Situationist muckraker, another dialectical spirit, who practised as well as preached *détournement*, the pillorying and hijacking of all things, the negation of all 'professional' things—of bourgeois art and literature, of bourgeois politics

and urbanism, of bourgeois spaces and ideas. 'All my life', Debord ([1989] 1991, 3) said at the beginning of *Panegyric*, his slim autobiography, 'I've seen only troubled times, extreme divisions in society, and immense destruction; I have taken part in these troubles.' Debord was a prophet of storms: he lived through a lot of them, conjuring up a few more in his own imagination. He said:

'I went slowly but inevitably toward a life of adventure, with my eyes open. I couldn't even think of studying for one of the learned professions that lead to holding down a job, for all of them seemed completely alien to my tastes or contrary to my opinions.' (Debord [1989] 1991, 12)

But Debord the destroyer was also Debord the creator of the greatest amateur dialectical prose poem: *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord [1967] 1970). One of its best lines is its opener, perhaps one of the best political lines ever written: 'All that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.' *The Society of the Spectacle's* 221 strange, elegant theses, aphoristic in style and peppered with irony, give us stirring crescendos of literary power, compelling evocations of a professional 'spectacular' world in which division spells unity, appearance essence and falsity truth. In this topsy-turvy world everything and everybody partakes in a perverse paradox, a paradox denied. What the young Marx ([1844] 1975, 377) said still holds:

'I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful women. Therefore I am not ugly ... I, in my character as an individual am lame, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honored, and therefore so is its possessor ... money is the real mind of all things and how can its possessor be stupid?'

Debord wanted to resist the reality of this professional non-reality, this world in which ugliness signified beauty, dishonesty honesty, stupidity intelligence. He wanted to subject it to his own dialectical inversion,

to his own spirit of negation. Scathing of the 'professional underlings of the spectacle', Debord actually wrote a follow-up to his original masterpiece, 21 years later: *Comments on the Society of Spectacle* (1988). He felt beholden to write again about our times, about times even more dire than before, because, he said, it seemed nobody else would. What he'd spotted was a spectacular *coup d'état*, a society gone madly professionalised, earmarked by several distinctive features: incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalised secrecy; unanswerable lies; and an eternal present.

Techno-gizmos proliferate at unprecedented speeds; commodities outdate themselves almost each week; nobody can step down the same supermarket aisle twice. The commodity is beyond criticism; useless junk nobody really needs assumes a vital life force that everybody apparently wants. The state and economy have congealed into an undistinguishable unity, managed by professional spin doctors, spin-doctored by professional managers. Everyone is at the mercy of the professional expert or specialist, and the most useful expert and specialist is he or she who can best lie. Without any real forum for dissent, public opinion has been silenced. Masked behind game shows, reality television and CNN, news of what is genuinely important, of what is really changing, is seldom seen or heard. Professional ineptitude compels not laughter but universal respect, as if it offers some kind of guarantee.

At times, Debord follows Stephen Dedalus from Joyce's (1960) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, even if he does it as an older man, expressing himself in some mode of life and art as freely as he can, and as wholly as he can, using for his defence his only arms: 'silence, exile, cunning'. Debord said he'd cherished the pleasures of exile as others had suffered the pains of submission. Is this impulse expressive of the amateur plight today? Maybe all amateurs are likely to be in some kind of metaphysical exile, out of place, displaced, living life, as James

Joyce says, this time in *Finnegans Wake*, ‘in the broadest way immarginable’. Yet I wonder, too, if amateurs nowadays *can’t afford the luxury of staying silent*, that we should air our dialectical contradictions, express them as loudly as we can, in public, battle for them, *exteriorise* them, alongside other amateurs.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, as Debord ([1989] 1991, 40) himself knew: ‘in a unified world there is no exile’. There is no real exile for the amateur, no geographical safe haven to flee to, no *without* the spectacle—only a refusal to perform *within* it, or to perform in a different subversive way; to be restless and questioning, sceptical and adversarial, caring for ideas that are ambiguous and contradictory, ironic and even comic. Dialectical amateurs will revel in expansiveness, in conflict and contradiction, just as pros will doubtless demand consensus and reconciliation. The pro’s media machine wants simple soundbite and clarity; the dialectical amateur affirms complexity and paradox—thoughts and ideas that can’t be distilled into trite banalities.

Maybe Empson’s (1973) work on poetic ambiguity (seven types) works itself through the amateur personality as psychological and social ambiguity, as ambiguity that animates amateur art as well as politics and urbanism, that mobilises metaphor (1); that turns opposites into new ideas (2); that puns—think of the wonderful *chaosmos* of James Joyce, a world in which everybuddy lived alone with everybidy else, preventing everybully taking over (3); that uses surprising words to reveal internal conflict (4); that expresses ‘fortunate confusions’ as random, unexpected words prompt fresh, unexpected thoughts and deeds (5); that fills in ambiguities left through emptiness, through lack of content, through stupid contentless banality (6); and that, finally, recognises the power of certain oppositions, that they’ll never be entirely resolved, and so be it (7).

Most ambiguities, says Empson, are *beautiful*: they hold things together in dynamic tension; they don’t imply uncertainty but

convey honesty; they don’t lack clarity but express tension, essential contradictions that form a necessary totality, tensions that must be conveyed and addressed, sometimes sustained. Such provides a richer meaning to words and actions, and to politics. The amateur personality will be a complex residue, a minority, a *normative* type, someone who *ought to be*, who we now need more than ever, a real intellectual, a real critic as artist, a creative destroyer, an ordinary amateur citizen with magical powers, with negative capabilities.

En route, we’ll see how amateur personalities will likely be fragile characters, too, minor characters who’ll need other minor amateur characters for support, other fragile dialectical personalities. Our inner contradictions must be expressed as collective enunciations, as an active dialectical solidarity. Together, we can create something positive, fuse all our negative energies and conjoin into something amateurishly affirmative, living beyond the negative. The maths is simple: the multiplication of negative integers stacks up into a positive whole number. Such is the creative ambiguity, the affirmation of our own amateur minorityhood, and no less inspiring for that. On the contrary, always on the contrary: we have just cause to celebrate our becoming-amateur, our collective and dialectical joyfulness in the madhouse and the whole thing there.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1970s, the radical paster, maverick educator and popularist democrat Ivan Illich published a fascinating little book with a wonderful tagline: **DISABLING PROFESSIONS**. The pun was deliberate: professions disable ordinary citizens, thus ordinary citizens must disable the professions. The latter, thought Illich, was vital for people to free themselves, to participate in a democratic process from which they’ve been excluded. Somehow, we’ve given ourselves over to these professions, joined them or stood by as they’ve taken over. We’ve given ourselves over to an age of disabling professions, an age when people have

‘problems’ and experts ‘solutions’. It’s an age that’ll be remembered, Illich (1977, 12) said,

‘as a time when politics withered, when voters, guided by professors, entrusted to technocrats the power to legislate needs, renounced the authority to decide who needs what and suffered monopolistic oligarchies to determine the means by which those needs shall be met’.

It’s pretty damning stuff; Illich may have been shocked, and doubtless dismayed, at how this age not only lingers on in our midst today but has extended its professional reach, entrenched itself even deeper, gripping our culture and society more tightly than ever before.

Yet Illich challenges us amateur citizens; his is a wake-up call to de-professionalise. A new array of experts in legal and scientific professions, in economic and administrative activities, in the academy, he says, now conspire to disable the citizenry, converting the latter into mere clients of the former. As such, ‘use-values are dissolved, rendered obsolete, and finally deprived of their distinct nature’. Illich’s hope against hope is for a ‘post-professional’ era, in which people recognise the professional emperor’s new clothes, that we’ve all been had, are still being had, that those guys are starkers and we should know it. Professionals need to be challenged by people power, by mass amateurism asserting its popular will, a will that also needs to be a collective political force.

Out of this post-professional vision we might create new *tools of conviviality*, says Illich, form another kind of human sociability, a collective commons beyond the profit logic, beyond monetary speculation, beyond professional mismanagement. What might get affirmed aren’t only ‘use-values’, but ‘vernacular values’, new embedded economic activities, a new convivial urban imaginary that addresses the problem most of us face today, a problem that takes us back to Edward Said: *representation*, which is to say, professionals intervening in three

troubling realms of representation, realms which profoundly, and detrimentally, affect the urban lives of amateurs everywhere. And amateurs must do away with these realms, break through them, democratise their mediation, directly live them out, re-embedding what has been disembedded.

The first is money, that fictitious commodity, money as the only representation of value, the realm in which professional accountants and economists and pay-rolled academics tell us what’s best. We’ve heard enough here; this nonsense (nonscience) has to stop. The second is professional mass media as the only representation of Truth, uppercase T, in which things that are really important rarely get a mention on radio and TV, or else get a mention in highly distorted and misrepresented ways. There are other truths that need voicing through different social media, truths that aren’t lies. Third, and finally, is representative government as the only representation of democracy; this version of democracy is another ruse, another inherent vice of professionalism. Only well-intentioned amateurs initiate real participatory democracy, ensure any radical urban future. Only well-intentioned amateurs treat urban knowledge and life as what Laurence Sterne’s Uncle Toby called a ‘hobby-horse’: as a passionate labour of love.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

- 1 Said’s Reith radio lectures were later written up and published in an invaluable little book called *The Representation of Intellectuals* (1994).
- 2 Maybe that’s why I’ve been so attracted to donkeys, those low-key, low-tech, amateur beasts who stubbornly bear their loads through life. The messy dissidence of the donkey even disrupts the ordered linearity of such a consummate professional as Le

Corbusier: 'Man walks in a straight line', Corb said in *The City of Tomorrow* (1925), 'because he has a goal and knows where he's going.' But 'the pack-donkey meanders along, meditates a little in his scatter-brained and distracted fashion, zigzagging in order to avoid large stones, or to ease his climb, or to gain a little shade'. The donkey's trajectory reminds me of the squiggly lines Laurence Sterne mobilises to illustrate the digressive path of his novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, published in nine volumes between 1759 and 1767. Sterne sketches out the wavering *human* line: coiled and curvaceous, whimsical and musical, arabesque and affecting. In one scene (Chapter IV, Volume IX), Corporal Trim, glorifying the trail of the free person, flourishes his walking stick, looping it haphazardly through the air, around and around.

- 3 Even such an enlightened commentator as Lewis Mumford similarly denounced 'mother Jacobs' for peddling 'home remedies' (see *The New Yorker*, 1 December 1962). Maybe it's just me, but doesn't lovingly prepared home cooking beat restaurant food any day, not only for its taste but also for its conviviality?
- 4 Nassau W. Senior was a lot like Reinhart and Rogoff: a 'so-called "bel-esprit" of economics . . . well-known', Marx says (*Capital* I, Chapter IX, Section 3), 'for his economic "science"'. Indeed, the manufacturers 'elected him as their champion', much as the financiers elect Reinhart and Rogoff as theirs. All three told their patrons 'scientifically' what they wanted to hear. Thus, to reduce the working day to 10 hours would, of course, be bad science, much as not to slash public budgets would be learnedly unwise. As Marx says, 'and the Professor calls this "analysis!"'
- 5 It's interesting how Joyce himself remodelled Stephen Dedalus as he coursed beyond his youth. In *Ulysses*, the young artist is now a teacher, a reluctant grown-up. Now, his sense of history is less introverted, one that conflicts with Mr Deasy, the old fogey Tory headmaster, Stephen's boss. 'I foresee you will not remain very long at this work', Mr Deasy says to Stephen. 'You were not born to be a teacher.' 'A learner rather', Stephen responds. 'All history', Deasy thinks, 'moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God.' Stephen has none of this. 'History', he says, 'is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' And, jerking his thumb towards the window, where the kids play hockey outside, adds: 'That is God. Hooray! Ay! Whrrwheel!' 'What?' wonders Mr Deasy. 'A shout in the street', answers Stephen, shrugging his shoulders.

- 6 I'm paraphrasing Empson's poem, from 1949, 'Let it Go'.

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