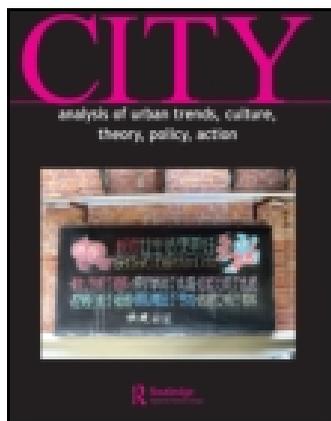


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Publisher: Routledge

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City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

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Published online: 24 Sep 2014.

To cite this article: Andy Merrifield (2014) Against accountancy governance: Notes towards a new urban collective consumption, *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 18:4-5, 416-426, DOI: [10.1080/13604813.2014.939463](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2014.939463)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2014.939463>

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Against accountancy governance

Notes towards a new urban collective consumption

Andy Merrifield

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, power brokers of our urban system assumed other managerial roles, other controlling roles more market-driven, more fiscally prudent. They started to recede from public view, dabbled with privatization, with contracting-out service delivery, doing it at minimum cost. After a while, this dabbling with the public budget became damn right babbling: entrepreneurial managers turned into managerial entrepreneurs and soon into middle-management technocrats, each with their own private hegemony of meaning. Before long, a new nobility assumed the mantle of political and authoritative power, a para-state of accountants and administrators, of middle managers and think-tank ‘intellectuals’, of consultants and confidants who reside over our privatized public sector, filing the paperwork and pocketing the rents and fees, together with the interest payments and bonuses, in our ever-emergent rentier and creditor society. This paper critically investigates the sweeping changes that have transformed urban governance since the 1970s.

Key words: urban governance, accountancy, collective consumption, capitalist reproduction, rentier and creditor society

In 1977, when Manuel Castells’ classic book, *The Urban Question*, was first put into English, I’d been a year out of secondary school in Liverpool. It was five years after its original French publication, four years since an OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil embargo had sent advanced economies into giddy nose dives and a year on from the Sex Pistols’ debut hit, ‘Anarchy in the UK’. They were heady times, the 1970s, full of crises and chaos, a post-1968 era of psychological alienation and economic annihilation, of punk rock and disco, of Blue Mondays and *Saturday*

Night Fever. The decade was also a great testing ground for a book bearing the subtitle, *A Marxist Approach*. Indeed, the same year as *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach* became available to anglophone audiences, the Sex Pistols were screaming, ‘THERE’S NO FUTURE, NO FUTURE FOR YOU AND ME!’

I didn’t know *The Urban Question* back then, nor much about Marxism; I was 18, hardly read anything, and remember most of all the candlelit doom of Callaghan’s ‘Winter of Discontent’. Power cuts, strikes and piled up rubbish seemed the social order of the day. And the Sex Pistols’

mantra of NO FUTURE seemed bang on for my own personal manifesto of the day. I became, largely without knowing it, something of a fuck-you anarchist, not really knowing what to do, apart from destroy—usually myself: ‘what’s the point?’, Johnny Rotten had asked. I didn’t see any point. The decade was dramatized by a sense of lost innocence. I watched my adolescence dissipate into damp Liverpool air, into a monotone gray upon gray.

It was only in the early 1980s that I first learnt to read and write to survive. By then, Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and I’d discovered something never encouraged at school: I loved to write, loved to write about things I’d read, about things I’d done, people I’d met. Before long, I’d gained access to the local Polytechnic as a ‘mature student’, as a second-chance scholar, as a scholar-with-attitude. That as the Thatcherite project was in full flight dismantling welfare statism; multiple levels of local and national government felt Thatcher’s ‘free market’ heat, got abolished, abused and recalibrated to suit the whims of an ascendant private sector.

This posed some pretty tough intellectual and political questions for my friends and I at Liverpool Polytechnic, as we passed our time wondering how to intellectually fill the post-punk void. We hated the bourgeois state with serious venom. We wanted to smash it, rid ourselves of its oppressive sway. Therefore, when Thatcher started to do just that, we were left wondering where to turn? Did we want that nanny state back? Life had been boring and programmed with it, but maybe things were going to be much worse without it?

In retrospect, 1984 seems a watershed, the significant year of contamination: Ronald Reagan had begun his second term and the Iron Lady had survived the Brighton Bombing; the IRA’s attempt to finish Thatcher off had the perverse effect of only setting her more solidly on her way, propelling her full kilter into dismantling the post-war social contract between capital and

labor, taking on (and taking out) organized labor and organized opposition in the process; Arthur Scargill and the miners took it full on the chin so marking *the* defining moment in a power shift between organized labor and an ascendant (postindustrial) British ruling class. With the miners’ defeat, Thatcher’s central government was able to push through, and further consolidate, its aggressive policies of fiscal conservatism.

Thatcherism was duly born and a strange, almost inexplicable, act of incorporation and co-optation, of universal reabsorption, had thereafter taken place. The Sex Pistols’ ‘NO FUTURE! NO FUTURE FOR YOU AND ME!’ had, by 1984, been squashed, beaten down, morphing into Michael Jackson and USA for Africa’s harmonizing refrain: ‘We are the World’. From wanting the world in 1967, as The Doors had demanded, there was no world worth having by 1977: the music was over; and yet, as we hobbled into the 1980s, suddenly we were told that somehow we now were the world. That NO FUTURE had been thrown back in our faces: we were this no future, this TINA (there is no alternative), and we’ve all been living with it ever since.

Maybe 1984 signaled the real end to the 1960s, sealed its fate. The year 1984 heralded the beginnings of the post-political, of the formal subsumption of Thatcherism and its apotheosis and real subsumption under neoliberalism. Maybe 1984 meant the end of continuing the old tradition of radical politics, using the same mindset, the same workerist politics, the same frames of reference and militancy. Making a racket 1960s style, or even 1970s and 1980s style, seems no longer tenable today, no more the required politics to tackle a capitalist beast that has absorbed us within it, wholesale and wholesale, lock, stock and barrel. Something else is needed than the desperation of Zoyd Wheeler, Thomas Pynchon’s hippie anti-hero from *Vineland*—which, remember, is also set in 1984—leaping through plate glass windows, breaking on through to the other side, trying to cling on to his government stipend

as a mental degenerate. There is an innocent charm to Zoyd's antics, as well as touching fatherly concern about his teenage daughter Prairie, about how she's going to grow up in a world whose value system is all bad karma for Zoyd. Yet the problem is that there's equally something pathetic about old Zoyd, too, trapped in his dope-hazed past, paranoid about the Reaganite present, paralyzed about thinking of a post-Reaganite future. Beneath the cobblestones there is no longer any beach; and if there is, its waters are now too polluted to permit nude bathing.¹

The year 1984 was also the year I discovered Castells' *The Urban Question*. The thing that immediately struck me, I remember, was its cover: Paul Klee's *Blue Night*. Only recently—very recently in fact, this past January at a London Tate Modern Klee retrospect—did I eventually see for myself Klee's enigmatic canvas, from 1937, one of his last, an unusually expansive (50 × 76 cm²) work in an oeuvre characterized by intricacy and smallness. For a long while, *Blue Night* was one of my favorite paintings. I'd always wondered whose choice it had been to have it adorn a book about Marxism and the city? Castells' own? I still don't know. The other thing that intrigued me about *The Urban Question* was its heavy Althusserian Marxism. I'd borrowed Louis Althusser's *For Marx* from the Poly library, trying to figure out what was going on. Little made sense initially. Only a lot later did I recognize how Castells mobilized in original and idiosyncratic ways twin pillars of Althusserian formalism: *ideology* and *reproduction*.

Unlike Althusser, this was Althusserian formalism applied to the real world, to the conflictual urban condition of the 1970s, to the fraught decade when capitalism attempted to shrug off the specter of post-war breakdown, the decade when I attempted to shrug off my own crisis, a coming of age in an age not worth coming of age in. Moreover, although this urban system was declining, was in evident trouble everywhere, collapsing

entirely it wasn't. Castells wanted to know why. 'Any child knows', Althusser had said in his famous essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', 'that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year.' The citation, a paraphrase of Marx, in a letter to Dr Kugelmann (11 July 1868), summed up the whole point of Volume Two of *Capital*: without reproduction there could be no production; without the realization of surplus value, no fresh surplus value could ever get produced; production is predicated on extended and expanded reproduction. Yet, given inevitable ruptures in the 'normal' functioning of capitalist production, how come capitalism survived then, still survives?

Althusser actually passed over all the stuff about reproduction of capitalist relations of production from Volume Two of *Capital*, passed over those political-economic 'reproduction schemas' that Marx conceptualizes, and beds his vision down in the ideological reproduction of labor-power, in his own particular notion of ideology: 'an imaginary representation of an individual's real conditions of existence'. Consequently, in *The Urban Question*, Castells attacked urban studies precisely because of its ideological content. Erstwhile research on 'the city', he'd said, had formulated 'imaginary representations', framing the city in terms of 'urban culture', in narrow sociological and anthropological terms. Such approaches focus on 'dimensions of the city', on 'densities', on 'size', on the idea that the city exhibits a particular specificity, its own of organization and transformation; a logic which, Castells said, pays scant attention to broader dynamics of capitalist political-economic and social relations, particularly to their *reproduction*.

So in *The Urban Question* Castells said the urban isn't really a unit of production at all; production operates at a bigger scale, at least on a regional scale and increasingly international stage. Production isn't the right analytical entry point into the urban question. Rather, it is, *à la* Althusser,

reproduction that counts most, the reproduction of the urban system and its links to the overall survival of capitalism. The urban, Castells insisted, typically awkwardly, is ‘a specific articulation of the instances of the social structure within a spatial unit of the reproduction of labor-power’.

From the mid-1970s onwards, around the time the Sex Pistols announced ‘NO FUTURE’, Castells began to define and refine his notion of the urban as the spatial unit of social reproduction by coining the concept ‘collective consumption’. Collective consumption is implicit in the reproduction of ‘unproductive’ collective goods and services outside of the wage relation, outside of variable capital, items like public housing and infrastructure, schools and hospitals and collectively consumed services. ‘The essential problems regarded as urban are’, Castells said, ‘in fact bound up with the processes of “collective consumption” . . . That is to say, means of consumption objectively socialized, which, for specific historical reasons, are essentially dependent for their production, distribution and administration on the intervention of the state.’

Yet what arose over the decade was an awkward predicament for progressive people, and for Marxist theoreticians: items of collective consumption so vital for reproduction of the relations of production, so vital for freeing up ‘bottlenecks’ in the system, so vital for providing necessary (yet unprofitable) goods and services, so indispensable for propping up demand in the economy—were now being cast aside. How could this be? What once appeared essential ingredients for capitalism’s continued reproduction—for its long-term survival—now turned out to be only contingent after all; the state began desisting from coughing up money for them; and soon, as the 1980s kicked in, would actively and ideologically wage war against them.

The Left has never really come to terms with the shock waves this earthquake engendered; the seismic tremor that registered big digits on the neoliberal Richter scale. The

1980s bid adieu to social democratic reformism, to an age when the public sector was the solution and the private sector the problem. The former now needed negating, pundits and ideologues maintained, required replacement by its antithesis; now the private sector was the solution and a shot and bloated public sector the problem. Managerial urbanization—when state bureaucrats dished out items of collective consumption through some principle of redistributive justice or vague notion of equality—had given way to an urbanization in which the *market* was the panacea. Writ large was the beginning of the privatization of everything, the outsourcing of democracy.

Thatcher’s assault on welfare provision and blatant class warfare created a generation of lazy entrepreneurs in Britain, capitalists who had no need to innovate or even become entrepreneurial because business was handed to them on a Tory silver platter. Those remaining urban managers no longer concerned themselves with redistributive justice; most wouldn’t even know what the phrase meant. Instead, their working day began to be passed applying cost–benefit analysis to calculate efficiency models, devising new business paradigms for delivering social services at minimum cost; services inevitably got contracted out to low-ball bidders, and whole government departments were dissolved or replaced by new units of non-accountable ‘post-political’ middle managers, whose machinations are about as publicly transparent as mud. *The Urban Question* was rapidly becoming an old urban question.

Maybe what was most entrepreneurial about the 1980s was the innovative way in which the private sector reclaimed the public sector, used the public sector to prime the private pump, to subsidize the reproduction of capital rather than the reproduction of people. Any opposition was systematically and entrepreneurially seen off, done in, both materially and ideologically. In 1986, Thatcher abolished a whole realm of regional government—the metropolitan

county councils—at the same time as she bypassed municipal authorities (frequently Left and/or Labour-run) with a new species of urban growth machine: so-called *quangos*, alleged public–private partnerships, bodies like urban development corporations (UDCs), which spearheaded London Docklands, as well as redevelopment of Liverpool’s deindustrialized waterfront. By this time, though, I’d gone up to Oxford to do a PhD with the famous Marxist geographer David Harvey, who suggested I summarily went back down to Liverpool, back to its ruins and ruination, back to talk to Militant, back to look the negative in the face and tarry with it.

I’ve been tarrying with negativity since then, trying to convert it into something positive. Yet several decades on, after a lot of reading, a lot of talking and listening, after a lot of political hope and a fair bit of disillusionment, after a lot of wandering around the world, I finally got down to writing my own version of *Urban Question*, entitled,

somewhat unoriginally, *The New Urban Question*. It’s a short, polemical book, a hopeful book that nonetheless tries to cover a lot of ground. It goes back to the source in order to move through and beyond the times, our times right now, when any ‘Marxist approach’ to the urban question demands hard answers; not least because now the dialectic of the urban as a site of capital accumulation and social struggle has changed. As the Thatcherite 1980s gave way to the Blairite late 1990s, and as it stands today, extended reproduction of capital is achieved through financialization and dispossession, through dispossession and reconfiguration of urban space. The urban is no longer an arena where value is created so much as extracted, gouged out of the common coffers, appropriated as monopoly rents and merchants’ profits, as shareholder dividends and interest payments; the urban, nowadays, is itself exchange-value. Quite recently, I tried to figure this dynamic out, with the aid of [Table 1](#).

Table 1 The Marxist urban dialectic

	CITY & DYNAMICS OF CAPITAL ACCUMULATION (reproduction of capital)	CITY AS ARENA OF SOCIAL & CLASS STRUGGLE (reproduction of relations of production)
1970s (Castells’ <i>The Urban Question</i>)	Predominance of primary circuit of industrial production; some secondary circuit investment (investment into real estate and property)	Social and class struggles at workplace (unemployment) and city-based ‘collective consumption’ issues
1980s	Privatization, financialization and deregulation; investment flows into secondary circuit of capital (cf. Big Bang and London Docklands); mergers and acquisitions; quangos; Enterprise Zones	Social and class struggles at workplace (union bashing) and intensified city-based collective consumption issues (housing, poll tax, etc.) and regional democratic concerns (metropolitan county councils)
1990s	Financialization and rentier extraction (land rents and interest-bearing capital); private finance initiatives (PFIs); accumulation by dispossession and repossession; shareholder capitalism	Urban-based global struggles around economic inequality (cf. Global Justice Movement, Seattle, 1999); anti-WTO and IMF
2000s (post-9/11) (<i>The New Urban Question</i>)	Rentier capitalism; secondary circuit of capital as fictitious capital; accumulation by dispossession; austerity; land grabs; predatory loans/parasitic extraction; creditocracy; parasitic mode of urbanization and ‘neo-Hausmannization’	Urban expression of democracy struggles, urban-based struggles against economic (neoliberal) authoritarianism and political authoritarianism (cf. Occupy); struggles against financial capital; debt resistor and anti-austerity struggles

Note: WTO = World Trade Organization; IMF = International Monetary Fund.

In Table 1, I am really *periodizing* the urban as an accumulation strategy and seat of resistance against this accumulation strategy, placing each in a decadal dialogue. The column on the left emphasizes the reproduction of capital while the one on the right emphasizes social reproduction. We're essentially moving from Castells' 1970s era, when the urban found its definition as a spatial unit of collective consumption, to our era when the urban gets defined by new forms of predatory dispossession, by what I call in *The New Urban Question*, 'the parasitic mode of urbanization'.

Now, insofar as risk management goes, insofar as addressing glitches within the overall reproduction of capital in the economy, the state is a *first* line of defense, a veritable executive committee for managing the common affairs of a bourgeoisie and aristocratic super-elite, stepping in at the first signs of crisis—bailing out the bankrupted corporations, the too-big-to-fail financial institutions. One way it gets away with it is through 'austerity governance', the latest form of ruling class manufactured consent, something fitting neatly with the material needs of those in state and economic power—the two are largely inseparable. Austerity enables parasitic predilections to flourish by opening up hitherto closed market niches; it lets primitive accumulation continue apace, condoning the flogging off of public sector assets, the free giveaways of land and public infrastructure, the privatizations, etc., all done in the name of cost control, of supposedly trimming bloated public budgets. What were once untouchable, non-negotiable collective use-values are now fair game for re-commodification, for snapping up cheaply only to resell at colossally dearer prices.

The net result, 30 years since my initial encounter with *The Urban Question*, is that collective consumption items have morphed into individualized consumption items. By this I mean that as the state has divested from its apparent systemic requirement to subsidize and fund public goods, as it has divested from its role of ensuring extended

social reproduction, erstwhile public goods have become accessible to people only via the market, hence at a price. Thus, people themselves willy-nilly pick up the tab of the price of social reproduction; we've taken care of our own lot, achieved it through borrowing money, self-reproducing as the private sector cashes in, quite literally at our expense. Returning, then, to the Castellan conundrum of how is it possible that the state can back away from funding collective consumption whilst ensuring the capitalist system continues to survive, we can answer this urban question quite categorically: via a *debt economy*.

According to a Bank of England *Financial Stability* report (November 2013), household debt in Britain has now soared to record levels. Individuals owe a total of £1.43 trillion. Families, we hear, are borrowing to deal with higher costs of living, using credit finance to pay household bills. The bulk of the debt is in mortgages, which are steadily on the up, reflective of inflated house prices. The debt economy flourishes, both publically and privately, because it is at once profitable on supply and demand sides. On the one hand, cities experience budget cuts, workers get laid off, services cut, libraries and sports centers close, education funding is slashed; public facilities are sold off to private, for-profit interests, for-profit vultures who valorize knockdown price public infrastructure. Municipalities need to borrow money in order to raise money. Public services are then run and maintained by private interests, invariably declining in quality afterwards. On the other hand, people are compelled to pay more, more on council tax, more on education, more on healthcare, more on services that are now driven by accountancy exigencies rather than peoples' real needs. It's no coincidence, then, that all those major items of collective consumption that Castells identified in the 1970s—education, housing and health—are now items featuring on the ever-growing list of household debt burden. People are falling prey to predatory loan sharks to fund basic human needs.

Loan sharks complement the apparently paradoxical proliferation of subprime predatory loans, of lending money and mortgages to vulnerable people who can little afford to pay these loans or mortgages back. In the 1960s, poor people were denied credit, couldn't get bank loans and financial aid because they earned too little or lived in the wrong part of town; whole populations and neighborhoods, invariably minority populations and neighborhoods, were written off as high risks, *redlined*, starved of financial aid for property ownership and small business development. One of the great popular American successes of this era was the implementation of the Community Reinvestment Act of 1971, outlawing redlining practices. Now, though, in a cruel twist of fate, in a savage contraflow, poor people can't get enough loans, frequently at exorbitant rates, with all kinds of hidden fees thrown in; the USA's subprime mortgage bubble was hyper-inflated by predatory loans; its bursting necessitated housing foreclosures galore—3 million, in fact, between January 2007 and August 2010 alone—and repossessions by the lender offenders who're eventually bailed out by federal government.

For good reason do activist-scholars like Andrew Ross now stress how

'capital owners in pursuit of profit have long moved beyond the workplace and into the "social factory" of everyday life . . . the debt burden is felt more intimately than workplace exploitation, if only because it cannot be cordoned off as the contractual tie we owe to our employers'.

Little wonder, too, that there's now a debt resisters' movement gathering steam. Citizens on both sides of the Atlantic are striking out at this vulture capitalism in our midst, and are participating in a debtors' movement called 'Rolling Jubilee'. Organized by Occupy Wall Street's roving 'Strike Debt' group, war hasn't just waged on the debt collector (US college tuition debt alone stands at \$1 trillion); it's also bailed out the people, raising \$600,000 to buy back a cool \$15

million worth of household debt, at a knock-down price on the secondary debt market (where bad debts are exchanged between wolves and sharks), a lot emerging from subprime mortgage foreclosures. Rolling Jubilee has liberated debt at the same time as highlighted the grand larceny and absurdity of our burgeoning debt economy.

Accompanying all this—to be sure, administering all this—mediating the dialectic between the reproduction of capital and social reproduction are accountants. Accountants somehow rule the political-economic roost in Britain. In the 1990s, we saw how their emergence involved nifty role switching, a certain morphing, revolving doors between accountants seconded into politics and politicians seconded into accountancy; and always the twain met over policy. Public welfare managerialism had somehow transmogrified into private welfare middle-managerialism. These days, accountants dominate the whole scene around so-called PFIs, or private finance initiatives, the brainchild of John Major in 1992. PFIs have helped themselves to urban infrastructure—ports, roads, schools, railways, electricity grids, seemingly the entire National Health Service (NHS) and God knows what else—not only in Britain but throughout the world.

In 1997, Blair's inaugural Labour government was, on principle, dead against PFIs; a year or so on, they had a change of heart, realizing they were a principled government—indeed, they had many!—and soon began to peddle PFIs more gung-ho than even the Tories themselves. When the going's good, PFIs—government-sponsored private companies, managed by accountants with zero public accountability—amass considerable booty; when things go belly-up, the government steps in to bail them out because they serve a vital public necessity and can't go under. It's an all-win situation for everybody, apart from the ordinary taxpayer and consumer. Meantime, the big four accountancy firms—Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC)—have

reputedly pocketed a cool billion pounds from their interests in PFIs.²

Accountants have a massive and growing stake in the delivery and management of Britain's public services, though always back scene. Take Capita, a giant IT, cleaning and refuse collection subcontractor, a company that dominates municipalities' public services up and down the country. Ernst & Young secures Capita's local authority contracts—in return for a fat commission. Capita was itself the brainchild of a former local authority accountant, Rod Aldridge, back in the deregulated 1980s. (The company has a £3 billion turnover with pre-tax profits for 2013 of £425 million.) In Birmingham, Capita's contract is worth £126 million a year, yet few councilors have a clue how that money is spent. The actual contract document, crammed with dense price structuring equations and abstruse financial calculations and projections, runs to over a thousand pages, and is purposefully complex—or so believes local Labour councilor John Clancy—incomprehensible to all but the savviest accountant. Capita's wheeling and dealing is shrouded in secrecy, utterly beyond public remit, let alone elected representatives. 'I've lost control of the future', admits Clancy. Rest assured it's all in the hands of Ernst & Young. We can sleep well at night. Only one thing is less murky: Capita capitalizes on councils making drastic cuts to save millions of pounds each year.

This split *within* the state between time-served councilors like John Clancy and private sector-imposed technocrats reflects the kind of rift that French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identified as *left and right hands of the state*; a drama played out between, on the one hand, the left hand, a dwindling bunch of experienced politicians answerable to their constituents and who still try to uphold local democracy; and, on the other right hand, a 'state nobility' of elite technocrats and cabinet plutocrats, finance ministers and public-private bankers who no longer even pretend to

want to change anything significant. The rift marks an ever-widening cleavage between left-leaning rank-and-file representatives who care about the public, and right-leaning senior civil servants who care only about the private, about budgets and bank balances. On the left side, we have publicly employed progressive councilors, social workers, community organizers, primary and secondary school teachers, health and housing officers, local government officials and progressive magistrates, care assistants and crèche workers; on the right side, we have a nobility of largely unaccountable agents propping up the upper echelons of the Ministry of Finance and its regime of Accountancy Governance.

As Bourdieu says in *Acts of Resistance* (1998):

'This opposition between the long-term view of the "enlightened elite" and the short-term impulses of the populace or its representatives is typical of reactionary thinking at all times and in all countries; but it now takes a new form with the state nobility, which derives its conviction of its legitimacy from academic qualifications and from the authority of science, especially economics. Not only by divine right, but also by reason and modernity does the movement of change lie on the side of these governors—the ministers or "experts"; unreason and archaism, inertia and conservatism are on the side of the people, the trade unions and critical intellectuals.'

Bourdieu insists on the winning back of democracy from technocracy; the latter has 'kidnapped' the state, he says, preached its withering away, made public goods a private fancy, the consumer the citizen. 'We must put an end to the reign of "experts" in the style of the World Bank and IMF', says Bourdieu, 'who impose without discussion the verdicts of the new Leviathan, the financial markets, and who do not seek to negotiate but to "explain".' We must break with the historical inevitability, professed by the doyens of neoliberalism; 'we must invent new forms of collective political work capable of taking note of necessities,

especially economic ones, in order to fight them and, wherever possible, to neutralize them’.

How to reinvent the future of public services and restore a re-enlightened definition of what constitutes the public realm? Of housing and health, education and public transport, work and play—of collective consumption? ‘In the work of reinventing public services’, Bourdieu says, ‘intellectuals, writers, artists and scientists have decisive roles to play.’ It is us who can help break ‘the monopoly of technocratic orthodoxy over the means of diffusion’; it is us who can ‘help draw up rigorous analyses and inventive proposals about the major questions that the orthodoxy of the media and politics makes it impossible to raise’.

If there is a job for radical urban research and politics—though who might fund it, I wonder?—it is to analytically and politically point the critical finger at this new nobility, of its select committee of accountants and administrators, the middle managers who reside over our privatized public sector, and who pull the strings in our fast-emerging rentier and creditor society.³ These managers fulfill public duties and undertake public roles, but do so within a more expansive and invasive private sector. They have become the right hand—and right turn—of the capitalist state. At a larger scale, we have a strange hybrid species of public–private sector bureaucrats, the nobility of Troika bureaucrats, the Euro technocrats and international *fonctionnaires*; not so much effete Euro MPs as indomitable European Central Bankers, for-profit public sector venture capitalists who determine the life-chances of Euro-crisis zones, of Greece especially. Here, let us cast our critical analytical and investigative eye over their doings, let us name names, make them accountable to ‘the people’; let us scrutinize their behind-closed-doors middle-management machinations, their austerity plans, expose their hidden ideological leanings.

Ditto those managers and accountants who preside over Moody’s or Standard & Poor’s

and affect the life-chances and fortunes of whole cities and regions; their ‘specialist’ financial opinions condition the credit worthiness of metropolises, holding the latter hostage to global bond markets. One condition for getting the coveted Aaa long-term rating (or short-term ‘Prime-1’ rating) is usually that the municipality applies the holy writ of accountancy governance, that it trims its budget, that it sells off the family silver, the city’s public infrastructure. Ditched assets have been gobbled up cheaply by another sort of manager, the hedge fund manager, who, after preying on wounded corporations over the past decade, now devotes predatory attention to wounded municipalities, especially across America, revalorizing the public domain for private gain. (Cogsville, a New York-based private equity firm, has been buying up fire sale and repossessed private properties across the USA; in Chicago, notably in Portage Park, Cogsville is now effectively the neighborhood landlord. Meantime, Blackstone, another Big Apple hedge funder, owns large swaths of repossessed and knockdown housing stock in Phoenix.)

Other types of managers lurk typically anonymously and unaccountably at the micro level, at the household level, a new kind of middle-managerial class and social gatekeeper. They determine peoples’ ability to get a mortgage, to rent a property, to get hooked up to utility services, to have an Internet provider, a mobile phone, a regular phone line—to have all the *accoutrements* you need to lead a regular life on planet earth. Indeed, these managers determine peoples’ entire financial and social life-chances because they prop up the numerous credit rating agencies that assess our ‘credit worthiness’. Firms like Experian, Equifax and Callcredit are self-avowed ‘global information service companies’ whose credit reports and scores, profiles and ranks predict a person’s present and future liability and ability to service a debt. Such credit agencies ensure the financial surveillance of everyday life. But they’re completely

beyond public scrutiny, a law unto themselves, profiting in Britain because of hopelessly outdated regulation (The Consumer Credit Act of 1974).

We urgently need financial accountability and transparency around private sector middle management and mismanagement. We need some citizens' global registry of financial assets, together with a list of which accountants are cooking their books. We need greater democratic knowledge of who owns what, as well as who tots up the figures for those who own what. Something along these lines appears to be getting explored in suggestive ways with the 'Citizens' Audit', an international network of local groups pressuring for an opening up of the state's books, scrutinizing the shenanigans of shadowy accountants and the partisan administrators therein. It's a program warranting consolidation so that ordinary people might conduct widespread audits—not professional accountants already on the payroll of those they are meant to be auditing—restoring democratic accountability around common resources and public assets, while there's still some left. Struggling for democracy means loosening the diktat those anonymous, unaccountable, behind-closed-doors middle managers have over our culture, those in both the private and public sector, those bankers and accountants, technocrats and creditocrats who orchestrate the financial repossession of our society. Breaking this mediating and obfuscating link implies struggling against the massively complex bureaucracies that rule over us. To do so we need to redouble mass civil disobedience, insist upon transparency around public affairs and link *institutional investigation* with *insurrectional outrage*.

Resistance to the dominant order must somehow hook up the inside of the public realm to the outside; 'official' representatives in government, in the council chambers, must be kept on their toes by shouts in the street, by direct action democracy, by a social movement exerting its pressure from

without, in the civic squares, in the alternative media, across clandestine airwaves, in the citizens' agora, forcing the right side of the state to respond to the left side. This may even give the subdued left side the courage to step out of the shadows cast by the right side, prompting it to come out of the council closet, emerge again into the accountable public light of the day. Meanwhile, probing researchers—inside and outside the university—can ally themselves with militant activists, transforming themselves into probing militants and activist researchers, vocalizing joint dissent in brainy and brawny ways.

Along the way, this alliance might also want to consider the degree to which Manuel Castells' vision of the urban still lives on. Indeed, Castells' idea of the urban as a unit of 'collective consumption' continues to say bundles, although not so much as an analytical category as a *normative construct*: the urban *ought to be* an arena characterized by collective use-values, by goods and services consumed in common, consumed by a public, by 'the people'; the urban *ought to be* a form of human sociability, a collectivity, beyond any kind of profit logic, beyond speculative exchange-values; the urban *ought to be* a site for social reproduction, a space where people can freely encounter one another, under circumstances in which a different, non-marketized definition of value prevails. Here we might heed Oscar Wilde, who remarked that a cynic knows the price of everything yet the value of nothing. Over the past few decades, we've had lots of cynics in our midst, lots of speculators and rentiers, lots of administrators and middle managers who seem to know the price of everything, obsessively and cynically calculating the price of public culture; but they sneer at the real value of things. We, on the Left, need to affirm another value yardstick, free from the cynics' speculative grip, another form of human solidarity, one that might enrich urban life beyond wealth.

Notes

- 1 Interestingly, when Christopher Lasch wrote *Minimal Self* in 1984, Pynchon's *Vineland* wasn't yet published. But what Lasch said about other Pynchon books that had appeared—*Crying of Lot 49*, *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*—equally holds for *Vineland*: 'Pynchon's ambitious but intentionally inconclusive novels dramatize the difficulty of holding the self together in a world without meaning or coherent patterns, in which the search for patterns and connections turns back on itself in tightening solipsistic circles . . . as Pynchon implies, the only feasible alternative to paranoia seems to be resigned acceptance of irreversible decline: the gravity that pulls everything irresistibly down into nothingness.'
- 2 The accountancy profession seems to single-handedly manage Britain's NHS; it's hard to keep track of those spinning doors, between private plunder and public health. In 2002, a PWC accountant, Simon Leary, got seconded to head up strategy at the Department of Health. Once on the inside, Adrian Masters, another PWC man, followed him, becoming Director of the Health Team at Blair's Delivery Unit. Masters has since gone on to run the health service regulator, Monitor, illustrating how even the regulators need regulating—just as Marx thought the educators needed educating! In 2009, moving in the opposite direction, Gary Belfield, Head of Commissioning at the Department of Health

(under Gordon Brown), joined KPMG, soon followed by his former colleague at the Department of Health, Mark Britnell; the latter is now hotly tipped to return inside the government and head of the NHS.

- 3 Such an intellectual project would need to put a new spin on sociologist Ray Pahl's old 'urban managerialism' thesis. Now we need its beefed up 'urban middle-managerialist' counterpart. Those public sector managers that Pahl pinpointed back in the 1970s, who gate kept scarce housing, education and health resources, now conspire as private sector bureaucrats who affect the whole allocative process around public goods and services—and hence the 'life-chances' of ordinary people everywhere. This is what Pahl said in *Whose City?* and which still holds with respect to those urban middle managers: 'We need to know not only the rates of access to scarce resources and facilities for given populations but also the *determinants* of the moral and political values of those who control these rates. We need to know how the basic decisions affecting life-chances in urban areas are made . . . The controllers of the urban system seem to control more completely than the controllers of the industrial system.'

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