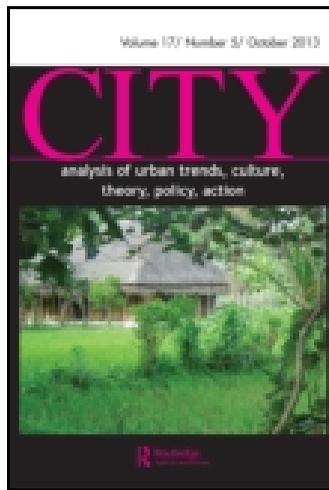


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# The politics of the encounter and the urbanization of the world

Andy Merrifield

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*This article encounters the politics of the encounter. It tries to reframe another way of thinking about progressive urban politics. It encounters Althusser, who wrote some of the nicest and profoundest lines on the encounter, and it encounters Lefebvre, with his notion of the urban as the site of encounters. It equally encounters the Occupy movement and in so doing encounters space, urban space, specifically a reworked conception of centrality. Althusser's proverbial rain rains ordinary urban rain, elements that have encountered one another because of a swerve, induced by encounters created by prior swerves, those that created, go on creating, new densities of connections ripe for further swerves. The clinamen strikes, rains rain so hard on the old order, on the old city, that the swerve has created a new world urban order, the plane of immanence for new encounters, for an aleatory materialism of bodies encountering other bodies in public. Such is the Occupy movement. People here encounter other people within and through urban space; the urban confers the reality of the encounter, of the political encounter, and of the possibility for more encounters. It becomes the site as well as the nemesis of the encounter, its positive, unifying capacity as well as its negative, demonic charge of dissociation.*

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**Key words:** Encounters, Louis Althusser, Henri Lefebvre, Occupy movement, Public space, Expression

*'Everything is formed out of connections, densities, shocks, encounters, concurrences, and motions.'* (Lucretius)

*'You can pull up the flowers, but you can't stop the spring.'* (Rebecca Solnit)

## 1. Taking-hold by surprise

Some of the best and profoundest lines ever written about 'the encounter' are Louis Althusser's, done in the 1980s, during the final, troubled decade of his life. At first blush, these 'later writings' seem to be a direct refutation of his

earlier, famous (and infamous) structural Marxism of the 1960s, brilliantly voiced in texts like *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*; they seem to express Althusser's own epistemological break, with a hyper-dialectical Marxism getting replaced by a more metaphysical, non-dialectical one. Now, 'over-determination' translates into a strange, chancy, almost-divine undercurrent that haunts both conscious and unconscious processes of life and politics. But Althusser would likely beg to differ: in those great early books, he'd doubtless contest, a non-teleological Marxism was consistently affirmed, a social theory and philosophy that saw Spinoza rather than Hegel as the

true precursor of Marx; already here was a Marxism not so much about fixed laws as laws of *tendencies*, a Marxism not about essences but about possibilities that *depend*, that have neither definitive beginnings nor ends; things happen contingently, stuff comes together, collides and colludes by surprise, doing so because of a readiness to interlock.

Althusser would be quick to acknowledge, too, how the 'encounter' features in 'untold passages' in Marx, in *Capital* Volume One's 'Working Day' chapter and in the 'theory of the transition' from feudalism to capitalism, best articulated in 'The Secret of Primitive Accumulation'. Althusser says that Marx 'explains that the capitalist mode of production arose from the "encounter" between "the owners of money" and "proletarians stripped of everything but their labor-power"'. 'It so happens that this encounter took place, "took hold", which means that it did not come undone as soon as it came about, but *lasted*.'<sup>1</sup> History takes hold because of encounters between immanent objective forces resultant of past, contingent encounters that somehow lasted, and a subjective reality that is even more uncertain and unpredictable; actions come without guarantees; potential outcomes can never be foreseen in advance. It is at particular moments or conjunctures when and where forces connect, when and where they come into collusion and collision with one another, when and where they take shape, take hold, take off, transmogrify into something historically and geographically *new*. Such is the mark of the non-teleology of the process, the brilliant and slippery logic of Althusser's so-termed 'aleatory materialism'. No speculative philosophy this; it has nothing to do with an 'idealism of freedom' since it is deeply, ontologically, materialist: materialism's repressed tradition, in fact, a hint of the existence of human freedom in the world of necessity, of possibility buried within the plane of immanence.

If anything has changed from the 1960s, it is perhaps that these 'later writings' was much more lyrically and poetically; Althusser is a lot more figurative and allegorical than he ever was; he shows rather than explicitly tells, gives us form without any content, contingency without contextuality. No better illustration of Althusser's poetry is his beautiful beginning, his opening lines to 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', destined a book but only materializing as 19-odd pages of longhand script. 'It is raining', says Althusser, another dreary Parisian day. 'Let this book therefore be, before all else, a book about ordinary rain.'<sup>2</sup> But this ordinary rain is equally a profound rain, the rain of Lucretius's atoms falling parallel to one another, the rain of the parallelism of Spinoza's infinite attributes, the rain that reveals the whole history of philosophy, of the universe, of life on earth. Ordinary, wonderful rain, raining down, providential and anti-providential rain. The rain of life pitter-patters down in the 'void' of pre-history, before the beginning of time and space, steadily it falls, raining atoms—the dance of atoms', Lucretius calls it in *The Nature of Things* (c.50 BC).

Everything falls, atoms in parallel with one another. They fall, unconnected from one another, blind to one another, restricted from one another. They fall, fall until, until, *they swerve*; something intervenes, something contingent breaks the parallelism, an 'infinitesimal swerve', Althusser says, the '*clinamen*', so small that it is hardly noticeable.<sup>3</sup> And yet, it alters the whole course of history, creates time and space, because in some, almost-negligible way, the swerve induces the encounter: one atom of the rain encounters other atoms; vertical falling rain crisscrosses with other drops of falling rain; they connect and rain into one another, strike one another, encounter one another, pile up with one another. Suddenly, somehow, there's an agglomeration of rain-drops, of rain atoms, and a chain reaction is unleashed; the birth of something new, a new interconnection, a new reality due to

the swerve. Atoms rain as bodies falling through ‘empty space’, Lucretius says, ‘straight down, under their own weight, at a random time and place,/ *They swerve a little*. Just enough of a swerve for you to call/ It a change of course.’<sup>4</sup> From this, Althusser qualifies,

‘it is clear that the encounter creates nothing of the reality of the world, which is nothing but agglomerated atoms, but *that it confers their reality upon the atoms themselves*, which, without swerve and encounter, would be nothing but agglomerated *abstract* elements, lacking all consistency and existence. So much so that we can say that the *atoms’ very existence is due to nothing but the swerve and the encounter* prior to which they led only a phantom existence.’<sup>5</sup>

The encounter is thereby ‘the accomplishment of the fact’, a pure effect of contingency. Before the accomplishment of this fact, Althusser ironizes, ‘there is only the *non-accomplishment of the fact*, a non-world of *unreal* existence’. The thesis, meanwhile, expresses the primacy of positivity over negativity, of Spinoza over Hegel, of a dialectical reason of sorts, but one that negates itself, negates all teleology of End; it’s a process that has no divine master plan nor even a subject as such, only a collectivity of comings together, of sheer *co-presences* defining its own singular object, the becoming-objective of the world, the creation of objectivity itself. Althusser’s Parisian rain thus moistens the world and whets (wets) the appetite of history, structuring its outcome, structuring its structure. His words, like my own here, are abstract, the concepts metaphysical; but it is perhaps not hard to glimpse, as we’ll soon glimpse, how the encounter of the natural order contains the germ of the maturation of the encounter of the political and urban order.

What is encountered are elements that have an *affinity* and *complementarity*; those elements that encounter one another express a readiness to collide–interlock, to take hold, taking hold like water becoming ice,

like mayonnaise emulsifying, like milk curdling. Things take hold, are taken hold [*surprise* in French] by *surprise*. ‘Every encounter is aleatory,’ says Althusser, ‘not only in its origins (nothing ever guarantees an encounter), but also in its effects. In other words, every encounter might not have taken place, although it did take place.’<sup>6</sup> The world of history *gels* at certain felicitous moments; ordinary rain becomes supernatural rain, rain that dampens everyday life, rain that encounters sunshine, takes hold radiantly, takes us in and sometimes over the rainbow.

‘This is what strikes everyone so forcefully during great commencements, during turns of history, whether individual or of the world, when the dice are, as it were, thrown back on the table unexpectedly, or the cards are dealt out again without warning, or the elements are unloosened in the fit of madness that frees them up for new, surprising ways of taking-hold.’<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Encountering the urban, urban encounters

Atoms rain ordinary urban rain, elements that have encountered one another because of the swerve, induced by encounters created by prior swerves, those that created, and go on creating, new densities of connections and ‘combinations’ (Marx’s words), ripe for further swerves. The *clinamen* strikes, rains rain so hard on the old order, on the old city, that the swerve has created a new world urban order, the plane of immanence for new encounters, for a newer aleatory materialism of bodies encountering other bodies in public. Things here encounter each other *within and through urban space*; the urban confers the reality of the encounter, of the political encounter and of the possibility for more encounters.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre plots his own encounter theory of transition; transition not from feudalism to capitalism, nor even from capitalism to socialism, but the passage from the city to

urban society. (True enough, the passage from capitalism to socialism is, for Lefebvre, *implicit* and *incubated* in this city–urban shift.) The city–urban movement is documented in a little diagram, even if in reality the transition from city form to urban society was never linear, never a simple rupture from one reign to another; instead, it was a combination of elements that over time and through space became ready and ripe to encounter one another, elements such as market expansion and penetration, market crises, technological change, demographic growth, political and social struggle, violence and disorder, all culminating at a particular point to create something quantitatively and qualitatively new and different. They combined and took hold in the city to create a swerve that gave birth to urban society, much the same way as Althusser and Balibar chart the transition from feudalism to capitalism: as contingent encounters of diverse and often disparate elements encountering each other. The urban was born from the encounter; and in the succession from agrarian society to the industrial city and to urban reality, there are, Lefebvre explains, ‘no “ruptures” as contemporary epistemology understands the term’. There are only ‘simultaneities, interactions, or inequalities of development through which these moments (these “contingents”) can coexist’.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, within the urban, within its plane of capitalist immanence, we encounter an assembly of objects, an assembly of people and activity; we encounter a virtual object that creates a real and prospective site for sustained and newer superimposed encounters, for fresh combining and assembly, for a gathering of essential elements of social practice. The urban becomes the site as well as the nemesis of the encounter, its positive, unifying capacity, as well as its negative charge, its demonic power of separation and dissociation, of alienation, of lonely rather than loaded crowds. The urban is where social unification and social integration encounter one another, doing so with a positive, dynamic

energy, with a creative lifeblood of attraction and incorporation; the rain falls until the swerve makes the atoms assemble themselves, reassemble into forms that enable us to collectively see and act. And yet, here, at the same time, as in all particle physics, there’s equally negative energy, in the form of repulsion, a minus charge generating a dialectical force field in which centers forever oppose peripheries and vertical rain falls forever vertically, without ever swerving, without ever breaking the eternal void. Atoms fall separately and separated.

For good reason are *separation* and *segregation* social realities that Lefebvre hates. They’re the enemy of urbanization, he says, ‘the enemy of assemblies and encounters’, profoundly anti-urban impulses, enemies of what his own potted definition of ‘the urban’ is: assembly in space, encounters in space, a dense and differential social space. Separation ‘breaks the unifying power of urban form’.<sup>10</sup> But the contradictory form of the urban is, of course, that it is essentially formless, formless because urbanization tends to break any limits that try to circumscribe its own form. It’s 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, how it rains, when it might swerve. Still, we know that there is a form of sorts to the urban—even if that form is empty in itself, a void: 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, through the swerve, through the creation of concentration and simultaneity, of density and intensity. The urban, we might say, is the place of the drama resultant from the encounter *and* the site where we encounter the drama of the encounter itself. The urban has order and disorder encounter one

another; the urban both enables and thwarts, promotes encounters and abolishes encounters. Nowadays, it is the product and place of online and offline encounter, the social network in which these two realities swerve into one another. Can segregation, the enemy of the encounter, arrest the movement toward democracy? ‘Can revolutionary upheaval’, Lefebvre asks, ‘break the boundaries of urban reality?’<sup>11</sup> ‘Sometimes’, he says, ‘it can.’

### 3. Occupation as encounter

We have seen recently the boundaries, if not broken, at least tested, as encounters have dramatized the streets of our current planetary urban order, profiting, as it were, from this planetary order, enlarging this planetary order. Our perspective and our prospective have been stretched, opened out after so many decades of closure. We’ve glimpsed a little of the *clinamen*, the swerve, effect our streets. We’ve seen encounters unfold in the ‘heart’ of ‘the city’, yet the stakes of organization and protest aren’t about the city per se; rather, they are something about *democracy*, in conditions of capitalist crisis, something vaster and simpler than the city as we once knew it, ensembles of bodies, hastened together by digital media. The Occupy Wall Street movement, one instance of a politics of radical encounter, began on 17 September 2011 when a handful of dogged activists ventured to the center of America’s financial universe, justifiably griping about growing income inequality and the stranglehold of big money and big 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; over the following two months, they’d be joined by thousands of supporters, who put up tents, built a makeshift library and field hospital, a canteen and department of sanitation. Suddenly, too, the protest captured popular imagination; not only of

ordinary Americans, but of ordinary, disaffected people worldwide.

Encamped in Lower Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park, thousands of demonstrators began organizing their spontaneity themselves, without either organizations or leaders. Mobilizing favorable public opinion, soon an online global ‘conversation’ grew at the same time as offline street protests, inspired by ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, took place across the planet: not only in New York but in Los Angeles, Oakland, Boston, Phoenix, Madrid, Rome, Stockholm, Lisbon, Sarajevo, Tel Aviv, Hong Kong, Berlin, Athens, Vancouver and Sydney. (The list is in no way exhaustive.) In London, in mid-October, 2000 people assembled in front of St Paul’s Cathedral and were addressed by WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange; demonstrators likewise decided to stay put in tents, well over a hundred of them, and began constructing an alternative radical lifeworld for themselves (#OCCUPY LSX), with an information center, a library, a meeting space, and a group of tents patched together where people debated strategy and spoke of ideas—so-named ‘Tent City University’. Occupiers duly threatened the City of London as well as the Church of England (St Paul’s Canon Chancellor, Giles Fraser, a sympathizer of the activism, quit when church bigwigs announced it wanted to oust occupiers on ‘health and safety’ grounds). ‘The current system is unsustainable’, ran Occupy LSX’s Initial Statement. ‘It is undemocratic and unjust. We need alternatives; this is where we work towards them.’

Demonstrators everywhere have shown to the world that masses of people—old and young alike—share the same sense of frustration and rage. Participants simultaneously acted and reacted, have been both affected and affecting; joy and celebration, tenderness and abandon, online and offline activism, all have found structuring, all somehow find definition. An Occupy Wall Street statement went

'The beauty of this formula, and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity. We talk to each other in various physical gatherings and through virtual people's assemblies ... we zero in on what awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future.'

With the emergence of this global movement, at last, there's something leftists can write home about, something to celebrate, salute, support. Everybody can henceforth don the 'occupier mask' themselves, join in, grin that mischievous and devilish Guy Fawkes grin and affirm our own phantom-faced defiance of big money and big business. Enough is enough: 'V' is for Vengeance. And, along the way, *Indignados* discovered their own numbers: 'We-are-the-99-Percent!' Demonstrators adopted the Guy Fawkes mask to conceal their faces and remain anonymous on the street, in front of the cops; but behind the mask, behind the disguise, behind that anonymity, demonstrators have somehow discovered and expressed their true identities.

The idea for the mask came from the flamboyant revolutionary hero of David Lloyd and Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, set in a futuristic dystopian Britain; the chivalrous, avenging, masked adventurer, himself inspired by Edmond Dantès, aka the *Count of Monte Cristo*, later made it to Hollywood, in a 2006 film directed by James McTeigue, starring Natalie Portman and Hugo Weaving. In its wake, the mask, patented by Warner Brothers, became readily available in comic book shops everywhere, at 10 bucks a pop:

'The mask. The masquerade ... Almost white this mask, with something of a debonair and Harlequin look, the cheeks a little rouged, the lower lip a little pink, the eyes a little more than slits that seemed to smile at times, at other times to squint, yet always having something of the vulpine. The ebony-painted goatee, the inky-black mustachios forever curling upward at the ends. The smile forever fixed.'<sup>12</sup>

'The truth is,' V told every TV watcher in futuristic London, 'there is something very wrong with this country, isn't there?' He was there to remind the world 'that fairness, justice, and freedom were more than words. They are *perspectives*.'<sup>13</sup> 'People should not be afraid of their government', he went on. 'Governments should be afraid of their people.'<sup>14</sup>

The July 2011 issue of *Adbusters*, the Vancouver-based anarchist mag, ran a poster of a little ballerina atop the Charging Wall Street Bull. Below it, a Twitter hashtag, backgrounded by gas-masked insurgents breaking through a tear gas fog, and the following caption: 'WHAT IS OUR DEMAND? #OCCUPYWALLSTREET. SEPTEMBER 17TH. BRING TENT.' The date 17 September being the birthday of the mother of Kalle Lasn, *Adbusters*' 69-year-old editor. A day worth celebrating. Lasn said

'The left had been chattering on about revolution for a long time, but we've basically been howling to the moon. And then, all of a sudden, a bunch of young people in Egypt using social media were able to mobilize not just 500 or 5,000 people, but 50,000 people. They inspired us with their courage and with their techniques.'

'America needs its own Tahrir', thought Lasn.<sup>15</sup> If you tweet it, they'll come, experience from the Arab Spring suggested. And come they did, all over the street, and all over the world. It was an announcement full of the same menace, the same gravity, same sense of ominous vengeance as V's hijacked air-call to take down the Houses of Parliament on 5 November, picking up the pieces of where the other Guy Fawkes left off centuries earlier.

It sort of began in December 2010, the *clinamen*, ushering in the encounter, taking hold, swerving, by *surprise*, just a little. The vertical rain of autocratic rule had been soaking Tunisia for years. Dictatorship gripped and brutalized common citizens like 26-year-old street vendor, Mohamed

Bouazizi, from Sidi Bouzid, a nondescript town 125 miles south of Tunis. For years police routinely harassed Bouazizi, fining him, confiscating the wares he peddled from his cart, making him jump through bureaucratic hoops. On 17 December, a female cop confiscated his balance scale and apparently slapped him about. He marched to the municipal HQ; but, as ever, his complaint was fobbed off. Outside the building's gates, Bouazizi set himself ablaze; paint thinner and a match did the trick. His flaming body was the trigger for mass mobilization, unfolding in the capital Tunis; by January 2011, a mass uprising was in the offing. Word quickly went out over the Internet and on Facebook and YouTube. Soon protests spread across to Egypt, to Mubarak's fraudulent and corrupt government; a 28-year-old Khaled Said, accused of hacking a drug-dealing police officer's cellphone, was arrested and beaten to death in a cell. Another swerve. Over Facebook boomed: 'We are all Khaled Said.' A 'day of rage' took place on 25 January 2011, in Tahrir Square, whose eventual scope and scale amazed everybody. Muslim Brothers and Christians and feminists all clasped hands; Tahrir Square was unofficially occupied by the people; Mubarak would be forced to step down.

By late spring, the offensive had spilled over to Europe, in a strange, contingent, unrelated, related, chain reaction, shifting its ante from political dictatorship to economic dictatorship; the rains were still raining but they were also swerving now, a lot. On 15 May 2011, several hundred thousand people piled into Madrid's central square, Puerta del Sol, unemployed, sub-employed, smart young people—whose prospects for ever working looked grim, whose lack of opportunities, austerity fears and frustrations with what politicians were doing (and not doing) in a meltdown economy, made people mad as hell; indeed, *outraged: Los Indignados*. Encounters were going viral. Ten days on again, the contagion spread to Greece, amid its financial and Eurozone crisis, amid its

devastating structural adjustment programs to please European Central Bank pinstripes; encampments multiplied in Syntagma Square, in the shadow of Parliament. Protests turned violent. In the second week of demos, half-a-million Greeks flocked into the nation's principle urban space. 'Yes, we can!'; went their collective chant.

When 17 September 2011 finally came around, demonstrators gathered by the *Charging Bull*, at Bowling Green, a few blocks south of Wall Street. The initial plan had been to hold a 'General Assembly' at Chase Manhattan Plaza. But the Plaza had been fenced off by the police the previous night. A snap decision called for a different tactic. Option two: head for Zuccotti Park, a couple of blocks further north, up Broadway. The small, obscure park, barely a couple of acres, was formerly known as 'Liberty Plaza', and its nominal as well as de facto reclamation wasn't lost on occupiers. Since 2006, the park had been privately owned by Brookfield Office Properties, fronted by a certain John Zuccotti. In a quirky legal technicality, that the park was privately owned meant it had no explicit closing hours (like Central Park and Union Square); so protesters couldn't be legally evicted, not immediately anyway. All New York officials were able to nail occupiers for was noise menace, especially using amplified sound without a permit. To circumvent this, 'the people's microphone' came into its own, avoiding bullhorn amplification, instead relying on word of mouth—quite literally—to spread the word; everyone within earshot simply repeated what was passed on, repeating where and when things were happening in the park.

In so doing, Zuccotti Park began helping define its own concept of urban centrality, shaping the trajectory, the swerving, of Manhattan and world radical politics. Its centrality wasn't the way Lefebvre once defined centrality in *The Right to the City*, as an absolute center of a city that was being taken back, like the Communards reclaiming central Paris, a hammer blow against a

specific site and then barricading that reclaimed site defensively; militant politics can't invoke that model anymore. Instead, centrality is always movable, always relative, never fixed, always in a state of constant mobilization and negotiation, within and without any movement. It's a kind of centrality that is the nemesis of centralization with its totalizing mission of domination and control; it's not so much about occupying a center as creating a *node*, a node that represents a fusion of people, and overlapping of encounters, a critical force inside that diffuses and radiates outwards; rain that creates its own tidal wave. Thus, centrality at Zuccotti Park represented the culmination of encounters, a new capacity for concentration, a tipping point, mediated by social media, which helped marginality center itself, helped it do so *horizontally*. After a short while, sister occupations appeared all over America, all over the world, in big and small urban areas, in and through urban space everywhere, assembling crowds, calling General Assemblies, combining action with ideas; no, action with more than ideas: action with *perspectives*, whose meme has become #OCCUPY EVERYWHERE. The encounter had prompted a movement; and this movement remains in motion to this day. Swerving rain. Awaiting the next monsoon season.

#### 4. Here comes everybuddy

Occupation as encounter isn't a Hippie thing; it isn't like 1968. It would be a mistake to draw too many historical parallels, other than both movements drummed drums and sang joyous songs. Forget 1968: what we've had since September 2011 is something radically *new* and different, something fresher, more futuristic, complexly electric rather than simply acoustic. The greatest difference 40-odd years on is *social media*: that changes everything; all bets are now off, and, indeed, all bets are very much now on. Social media changes

the *tactics*, the *tempo*, and the *terrain* of any activism, the three Ts. There's very little here that resembles the student and anti-war movement of the 1960s. True, the protagonists are likewise young and invariably educated, sometimes super-educated; almost everywhere, from the Middle East to the Midwest, protestors are disproportionately young people who hail from the privileged 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. There are few spoils to anticipate in their 30s. Privileges have run dry, except for the 1%. For all the anti-war fervor from the 1960s, none of the young then ever doubted their rights to help themselves to the whole consumerist bit; a degree would assure a job, a good job somewhere, later on. Not anymore. 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 *Wall Street 2: No Income, No Jobs and Assets* . . .

Tent-pitching tweeters tend to be in their 20s, still servicing college loans, prompted to act by a sense of betrayal. They're wising up fast, though, knowing that they can no longer have any expectations, that the reality of the *now* merits no expectations. As *New York Times* columnist James Carroll has explained, the phenomenon is planetary, spawning a burgeoning set of multilingual neologisms to describe this social positionality and downward mobility. In Japan, says Carroll, comes 'freeters', those still freeloading off their parents; in the UK, there's the 'neets', 'not in education, employment or training'. In Spain, 'ni-ni', neither workers nor students; in Germany, we have 'nesthockers', or nest-squatters; in Italy, 'bamboccioni', that is, grown-up babies. All remain in post-studentdom, neither student nor adult, a state of suspended 'waithood'.<sup>16</sup> Yet, their protests suggest they're not willing to continue to wait. They've been pushed over the edge:

whatever they were waiting for is no more worth the wait.

What they've voiced is a broadly anti-capitalist agenda, a systemic indignation, out-Tea Partying the neo-con Tea Party, indicting reckless financial speculation, unaccountable bankers, corporate tax dodging, corporate welfare; they see nothing worthwhile in traditional party political machines, either, and are almost as leery of crony unionism; scant attention, too, is paid to 'the working class', to the old ideological battle lines, to bawling the same old demands in the same old 'vertical' manner. Participants gel because of affinity, because of a common identification, because they share and want to express common notions, about themselves and about the world. Meanwhile, the gelling takes hold quasi-anarchically. Decisions are made by consensus, within the General Assembly, facilitated through debate and discussion, not via domination. Organization spreads out like a tentacle, like an amorphous web, delicately structured yet robust enough to resist, because this structure is often difficult to pin down, elusive; its power-base isn't hierarchical and thus isn't easily identifiable for any enemy. It doesn't rise upwards but spreads outwards. It absorbs rather than gets smashed. It is pliable rather than cast in stone. It can't be toppled. And if its flowers can be ripped up, its spring won't stop flowing, won't stop raining.

Social media are central for helping all this come into play, come into being, into becoming, helping the swerving, helping transform a virtual presence into a physical presence; and vice versa. Social media are key tactical tools. Henceforth, organization self-organizes, affinity networks are hyper-networked. Within every occupation, protesters aren't so much concerned with seizing power as regaining control over their own lives. Nor are they conscious of belonging to any class. All want to disengage from the market 'rationality' of neoliberalism; all want to confront a small minority of the world's population who commandeer global finance and global governance. 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 rendezvous *just-in-time*. Twitter and Facebook, mobile phones and SMS messaging, Blackberry BBM texting, have all collapsed space and diminished the time of organizing, of rounding up troops or shifting them elsewhere, of supplying reinforcements when and where needed, of dodging heavy police presences. Spontaneous street assembly can be managed and orchestrated—media staged; a newly forming, looser alliance of concerned citizens, spanning the globe and dialoguing across borders and barriers, all find collective lingua franca in an activism that invariably comes home to roost in bites as well as bytes.

In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky rightly pointed out how social media enable groups to 'punch above their weight', to mobilize the few while having the significant impact of the many.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, anonymous minorities discover that they're 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 Everybuddy.'<sup>18</sup> The pun is 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'.<sup>19</sup> 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. Bill Wasik, one of *Wired* magazine's senior editors, recently said this 'mega-underground' comprises

'groups of people for whom the rise of Facebook and Twitter has laid bare the

disconnect between their real scale and puny extent to which the dominant culture recognizes them. For these groups, suddenly coalescing into a crowd feels like stepping out from the shadows, like forcing society to respect the numbers that they now know themselves to command.'

'What's really revolutionary about all these gatherings', said Wasik, perceptively—'what remains both dangerous and magnificent about them—is the way they represent a disconnected group getting connected, a mega-underground casting off its invisibility to embody itself, formidably, in physical space.'<sup>20</sup>

### 5. Encountering space, spaces of encounter

Such gatherings in physical space, in public space—in forcing space to be public again—shouldn't, however, be confused with a sense of place, with a grounding in the *city*. The tactics of this movement, as well as the tempo of its dynamics, of its ebbing and flowing, of its 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 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; 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. This unity is simultaneously urban and post-urban, an urban politics that somehow breaks the boundaries of the urban itself; of urbanism going beyond itself. Another way of putting it is to say

that the urban is a concept and a reality that is there, but no longer present under its own name, no longer visible as its own reality; neither content nor form but rather something *immanent* in the occupation itself. The occupation, in short, expresses *the practice of urban immanence*.

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 to each other, to meet each other, quite literally. They are public not because they are simply there, in the open, in a city center, but because these spaces are made public by people encountering one another, there. We can rename them *spaces of encounter*, spaces in which social absence and social presence attain a *visible* structuration, a political coherence. 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 capitalism, drawing the outside within itself while enlarging its own sphere of activity, propelling it onto the outside; the all-encompassing dynamic of globalization and planetary urbanization means that the particular can only ever be amplified, magnified and multiplied as something universal. 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 dynamic complementarity. As such, the stake of protest is not strictly the city nor even the urban; yet perhaps, just perhaps, it 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 publicly define themselves, encounter one another, talk to one another, as citizens in front of the whole wide world.

An occupation's centrality, to repeat, doesn't come from its inert physical presence in a central location; occupations have actively staked out centrality. They have *made* those central locations. That's precisely why they can never be evicted, even if they get evicted. You can't evict a revolution. A revolution is a process; a revolution is a *perspective*, which constantly moves on and changes its purview, its ways of seeing and structure of feeling. Its perceptions and horizons are just beginning to be felt and seen, just beginning to encounter each other, reveal themselves to one another, everywhere. Perhaps one of the buzzwords we can glean from occupational politics is *expression*, that these groups encounter one another to *express* themselves, to express their affinities, their dissatisfactions, their non-verbal desires. These encounters are expressing political ambitions before the means to realize them are created, are yet invented. One of the things that strikes here is how this *Here Comes Everybuddy* expresses a hitherto unknown and unacknowledged mode of solidarity latent within everyday life, a new form of empathetic human relationship—of *common notions* based upon *adequate ideas*.

In his great book on Spinoza, Deleuze claims that every adequate idea is an idea that is *expressive*, expressive of our 'active affections'. Active affections are, says Deleuze, necessarily *joyful*, necessarily active, necessarily expressive of an activity that overcomes sadness and passivity, that

overcomes passive affects. 'So if our power of action increases to the point that we come into its full possession,' writes Deleuze, 'our subsequent affections will necessarily be active joys.'<sup>21</sup> Joyful passions lead us closer to the ability to activate our own power, to express our *conatus*, our power to do, to strive and to achieve something in that striving. Deleuze thinks that a central motif of Spinoza's intuitive reason is 'the effort to organize encounters in such a way that we are affected by a maximum of joyful passions'. Joyful passions occur only because they base themselves upon 'adequate ideas', and all adequate ideas emerge through notions we understand as agreeing with our body and our mind, with our collective bodies and minds, a necessary complementarity between bodily feeling and conceptual understanding. These notions are somehow universal to us, common to us, hence *common notions*, the brilliant discovery of Spinoza's *Ethics*, the key item therein. A common notion is something that bonds us biologically and mentally, corporeally as well as cognitively, a bit like the recognition of the 99%, the recognition that, when all is stripped away (like lonely King Lear on the heath feeling the existential chill), life is no more than this, that in the end, when all is seemingly lost, all is never quite lost because we have one another; we can still express a common understanding, have common ground, hold common notions; we are still able to sleep with one another, body next to body, bodies huddled in tents next to one another, bodies in agreement, bodies sharing naked life. (The other 1%, who flee the tents, who dress fancily, is still in denial.) Once we enter into the realm of common notions, Deleuze says (pp. 290–291), we enter into 'the domain of *expression*: these notions are our first adequate ideas, they draw us out of the world of inadequate signs',<sup>22</sup> those we recognize now as a life lived as folly, the inadequate life lived by the dominant few.

The common notions that bond occupants, that have sustained occupiers, that flag up and

express collective affinity, that express the reasoned-imagination of young people today, seem to me to be something more than Marxist class consciousness, something deeper, more ethical and universal; not expressive of a right nor even of any demand, but of a looser common desire to live differently, to live together in a system that does things differently, operates differently, produces differently and, perhaps above all, is controlled differently. What we've seen unfold here is more akin to Spinoza's 'second kind of knowledge', to a knowledge organized around the identification of common *relationships*, knowledge that has moved on from a confused, everyday common sense—from a knowledge, as Gramsci told us, that is laden with chaotic, fuzzy conceptions about how we live. Spinoza's second kind of knowledge is maybe more like Gramscian 'good sense', a commonality on its way to discovering life's essence.

This is a commonality that isn't afraid of technology; it is one that embraces the future, that still sees a future. In a way, participants know *they are the future*. It's true, of course, that their common notions express an implicit Marxist voice in that they deny the current logic (and illogic) of capital, of capital accumulation on an expanded scale, of accumulation by dispossession, of a capitalism that bears little similarity to the classic, mild-mannered Smithian market system, with its morally virtuous, well-intending invisible hand. This current system functions upon little else apart from brute finagling and rampant corruption whose only virtue lies in its ability to create monopolies intent on buying off venal politicians (or elevating venal businessmen to politician-hood; even nicer work if you can get it!). It is a system, everybuddy knows, based upon asset stripping and commons plundering, on raiding the public coffers through privatization, on corporate fraud, on awarding gigantic bonuses to serial failure businessmen, on rolling the dice on the stock market and running off as fast as one can with the booty; it is a system

that has shown practically no commitment to investing in living labor in actual production. Moreover, when it all collapses, as it inevitably does, anti-socialist free-market-eers come running to the state, cap in hand.

Common notions in Spinoza's second level knowledge 'find in the imagination the very conditions of their formation', says Deleuze. The application of these common notions implies 'a strange harmony between reason and the imagination', he says, 'between the laws of reason and those of imagination'.<sup>23</sup> In this grand scheme of things, imagination develops images of a reality out of which feelings emerge, feelings that somehow get transformed into ideas about feeling, ideas that absorb feeling and imagination into a clear-sighted, clear-headed concept. Hence it becomes an adequate idea because it attaches itself to a common notion, a reasonable notion, a notion in which imagination and reason encounter one another. The unity emboldens itself to be expressed actively, in action, in an implicitly expressed 21st-century urban politics—its debut form in fact.

This is the specter that now looms large, that has now exited the shadows to enter the limelight; no more is it sat behind its PC, tweeting alone. A mega-underground is reshaping the overground, haunting it globally, remaking the very fabric of the urban reality that Lefebvre hinted at 40 years past. The force of this mega-underground still remains somehow latent; it has yet to exert its capacity power, its full numerical capability; it still doesn't punch at its true weight, with all its muscle. It's perhaps that which unnerves the powers-that-be so much; at least it *should* unnerve them: that latent capability, that contingent possibility that people might still encounter other people, lots of them, millions and millions of them, to form dissenting crowds in urban public space.<sup>24</sup> 'The urban consolidates', Lefebvre said in *The Urban Revolution*;<sup>25</sup> the urban creates and is created by difference; the urban lets particularity and difference identify its own universality, encounter its own universality,

create universal citizens who go on to make the urban public realm and who play out their own common notions in public. There, we arrive at another way of defining the contemporary urban scene: *it lets adequate ideas become common notions in public*, doing so because the urban makes a public and provides a public with a forum for its own collective expression. It realizes virtuality, and makes virtuality virtually real. It is a mode of expression that owes a lot to new technology and thus the relationship between a politics of the encounter and urban space is deeply wound up with technology, with new digital media, with the sort of 'network society' that Manuel Castells had brought to the forefront of our political-economic culture. The network society is an urban society, something virtually urban, as Lefebvre might say, an expression of urban virtuality.

The dialectical (and Faustian) link between technology and the urban isn't lost on Lefebvre. To be sure, in one of his long-forgotten books *La pensée marxiste et la ville*, from 1972, the thesis he expounds is precisely how one implicates the other, how the development of science and the application of technology (read: new digital media and automated work) is both a cause and effect of the urban. Technology signals the knell of the city, he says, boldly and loudly, perhaps a little provocatively, since, in part, it is predicated on overcoming the limits of the city itself; it thereby enables the urban to come into existence, to expand its *planetary* domain, he says. Put a little differently, industrial capitalism was city-based; immaterial, cognitive capitalism is preeminently *urban*. The end of work is tantamount to the end of the city; and vice versa.<sup>26</sup> The assertion 'end of', needless to say, is rhetorical, given we are dealing here with a reality without foreseeable 'ends', without definitive breaks and clear demarcations; what we have, instead, are transformed forms, a transitional gelling of encounters between the past, present and future, a taking hold, to the degree that the end of work merely signals a

new basis for the activity of work, one done in a 'post-work' culture, in an urban-based, planetary social formation.

Lefebvre points out how Marx himself explored these tendencies presciently in the *Grundrisse*. A society of non-work can only ever be, Lefebvre says, following Marx, an urban society; it's a society that has 'overcome' the separation between the country and the city, and valorizes itself through the 'general intellect'. This is a society, says Marx, in which technology 'suspends' labor from 'the immediate form', so that dead labor valorizes living labor (and not the other way around). It spells 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 mega-underground occupational activism. All of which means, bluntly, the end of any expectation that working people have any rights to dignified work and a living wage, to cushy salaried employment, to a job for life; all expectations of a paternal capitalism are illusory and delusional. When 'labor-time ceases to be a measure of wealth and value', Marx says, then and only then will a new era experience its birth-pangs.<sup>27</sup> In the *Grundrisse* (cf. pp. 699–712), Marx, Lefebvre thinks, projects the immanent possibilities in a planet transformed into a vast form of fixed capital, immanent possibilities in a world in which the only labor that now really counts is no longer the labor of hardware but of thought-ware, of immaterial labor, of cognitive no-collar capitalism.

Lefebvre, like Marx, regales the prospect; he says so in *La pensée marxiste et la ville*; he says so because he thinks Marx regaled the prospect, too: a thoroughly urbanized society inevitably ends work as we know it and overcomes the old divisions of labor, in both their social and detailed forms. Marx's tack in the *Grundrisse* is that of an optimist, rubbing his hands gleefully at the sight of 'this foundation getting blown sky-high' (p. 706), seeing a world that 'suspends' labor, that revolves around 'dead labor', the production of social

life under the control of the ‘general intellect’, as pregnant with its contrary, as a ‘moving contradiction’. How so? Because it reduces the time of ‘necessary labor’, Marx says (p. 708), because here we have all the instruments available, all the wherewithal for creating ‘the means of social disposable time’, for ‘reducing of labor time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum’, for ‘freeing everyone’s time for their own development’. ‘Is this utopianism, science-fiction?’, Lefebvre wonders.<sup>28</sup> Maybe.

At any rate, there are immanent dangers. Of course there are immanent dangers. So long as urbanization continues its long march in its current guise, society will, Lefebvre says, continue to fall between a ‘double dependence’—between *technocracy* and *bureaucracy*, a double dependence that might thwart Marx’s optimism about the collective accumulated powers of intellectual labor in urban society; rather than offering liberation, the application of science simply becomes another source of value-added, of business-as-usual crises and breakdown, of exploitation and misery (especially self-exploitation of the masses under the guise of self-employment); it becomes, in other words, another ingredient in the complete and *undemocratic* urbanization of the world.

## Notes

- 1 Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter, Later Writings, 1978–1987* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 197 (Althusser’s emphases). This line of thinking about the transition from feudalism to capitalism had actually been first explicated in *Reading Capital*, by Etienne Balibar’s chapter on primitive accumulation, with an ‘encounter’ between contingent forces giving rise to the birth of capitalism; all of which demonstrates a theory of the encounter in unexpressed and implied terms. See ‘Elements for a Theory of Transition’, in *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 1979).
- 2 Althusser, ‘The Undercurrent of the Materialism of the Encounter’, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 167.
- 3 *Clinamen* is actually Lucretius’ original Latin word, the unforeseen deviation in linear trajectory, the unpredictable, random movement of matter; *clinamen* translates as ‘swerve’ in English.
- 4 Lucretius, *The Nature of Things* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 42.
- 5 Althusser, ‘The Undercurrent of the Materialism of the Encounter’, p. 169 (emphases in original). Althusser draws a lot from the Roman philosopher and poet Lucretius, whose six books of *The Nature of Things* expound the earlier ideas of the ancient Greek Epicurus. It’s hard not to believe that Althusser hadn’t read Gilles Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense*, too, first published in 1969, because it gives a brilliant summary of Lucretius’ *clinamen*. ‘The *clinamen*’, Deleuze writes, ‘manifests neither contingency nor indetermination. It manifests something entirely different, that is, the irreducible plurality of causes or of causal series . . . the *clinamen* is the determination of the meaning of causal series, where each causal series is constituted by the movement of the atom and conserves in the encounter its full independence’ (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Continuum Books, 2004), pp. 306–307). For a nice recent take on Lucretius’ famous swerve, a swerve that arguably gave birth to the Renaissance, to Enlightenment humanism, to a new intellectual dawn, see Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: Bodley Head, 2011). As Greenblatt shows, out of Lucretius’ gloomy falling rain came the radiant light of reason, rebelling against the crippling orthodoxies of the church and centuries of monastic darkness.
- 6 Althusser, ‘The Undercurrent of the Materialism of the Encounter’, p. 193.
- 7 Althusser, ‘The Undercurrent of the Materialism of the Encounter’, p. 196.
- 8 See Andy Merrifield, *The Politics of the Encounter: Urban Theory and Protest under Planetary Urbanization* (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, April 2013).
- 9 Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003), p. 32.
- 10 Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, p. 124.
- 11 Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, p. 125.
- 12 *V for Vendetta* (New York: Pocket Star Books, 2005), p. 4. I am citing from the film’s novelization by Steve Moore (no relation to Alan), based on a screenplay written by the Wachowski brothers.
- 13 *V for Vendetta*, pp. 73–74.
- 14 *V for Vendetta*, p. 106.
- 15 Kalle Lasn, cited in ‘Revolution Number 99’, *Vanity Fair*, February 2012, p. 63.
- 16 James Carroll, ‘Youth Pushed to the Edge’, *International Herald Tribune*, 11 October 2010.
- 17 Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2008).
- 18 Cf. Andy Merrifield, ‘Crowd Politics, or, Here Comes Everybuddy’, *New Left Review*, No. 171 (September/October 2011), pp. 103–114.

- 19 Cf. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 21. 'When mulk mountynotty man was everybully and the first leal ribberobber that had ever had her ainway everybilly to his love-saking eyes and everybuddy lived alove with everybiddy else ...' Everybuddy lived alove with everybiddy else, preventing everybully from taking over. There is a formidable digital presence around the world concerned with the occupied movement. As at November 2011, according to the *New York Times* (24 November 2011), there were 1.7 million videos on YouTube, viewed a total of 73 million times, and more than 400 Facebook pages with 2.7 million buddies around the world. When the wonderful late Gil Scott-Heron sang 'the revolutionary will not be televised', he was rapping to another, older generation of militants.
- 20 Bill Wasik, 'Crowd Control', *Wired*, January 2012, p. 112.
- 21 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Spinoza's Philosophy* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), p. 274.
- 22 Deleuze, *Expressionism in Spinoza's Philosophy*, pp. 290–291 (emphasis in original).
- 23 Deleuze, *Expressionism in Spinoza*, p. 294.
- 24 A recent World Economic Forum (WEF) report cited the Occupy movement amongst business leaders and policy makers' 'Top Global Risks' for 2012; 'if not addressed', the report warned, they contain 'the seeds of dystopia', 'a place where life is full of hardship and devoid of hope'. According to WEF bigwigs, Occupy exhibits a potentially damaging 'backlash against globalization' and 'the darker side of connectivity', as do cyberhacker groups like Anonymous, whose 'motives for subversion can be as trivial as simple boredom'! (see [www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GlobalRisks\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalRisks_Report_2012.pdf)).
- 25 Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, p. 174.
- 26 Lefebvre, *La pensée marxiste et la ville* (Paris: Casterman, 1972), p. 68.
- 27 Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 705.
- 28 Lefebvre, *La pensée marxiste et la ville*, p. 68.

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