

# Citizens' agora

## The new urban question

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What would Rousseau, who penned his classic *Discourse on Inequality* in 1755, have made of things today? Had he still been around, had he travelled around the globe a bit, he'd have doubtless despaired of how little 'civilized' society had ameliorated the 'artificial' inequalities that derive from the conventions that govern us. Maybe he'd have also played a cameo role in a new documentary, *Inequality for All*, directed by Jacob Kornbluth with economist Robert Reich as the unlikely lead.<sup>1</sup> Already a big hit at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, *Inequality for All* follows Reich teaching his packed undergraduate class on Wealth and Poverty at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1978, says Reich, your typical male worker doing just fine in the USA was pulling in around \$48,000 a year; your boss back then was probably making around \$390,000. Thirty-odd years on, in 2010, the former struggles to earn \$33,000 a year, while the latter's average share has bloated to well over a million bucks a year. 'Where America leads', Reich says, 'the rest of the world follows. This same thing is affecting people all over the world. If nothing is done to reverse this trend, Britain will find itself in exactly the same place as America in just a few years' time.' Indeed, as at December 2010, 10 per cent of the fattest cats in the UK own 40 per cent of the national wealth; and Royal Bank of Scotland bankers, after finagling Libor interest rates and suffering losses for 2012 of £5.2 billion, now award themselves bonuses in excess of £600 million.

Never before has growth – especially urban growth – depended so centrally on the creation of new mechanisms to wheel and deal finance capital and credit money, on new deregulated devices, underwritten by the state, for looting and finagling, for absorbing surplus capital into real-estate speculation. These days capital accumulation predicates itself not so much on production as such but on *dispossession*, on expropriation.<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, Baron Haussmann tore into central Paris, into its poor neighbourhoods,

dispatching denizens to the periphery as he speculated on the centre; the built urban form became simultaneously a property machine and a means to divide and rule. Nowadays, *neo-Haussmannization* is a process that likewise integrates financial, corporate and state interests, yet tears into the whole globe and seizes land through forcible slum clearance and a handy vehicle for dispossession known as 'eminent domain', wherein the public sector expropriates land and then gives it away for upscale private reappropriation, letting private economic interests cash in on what is legalized looting.

In our *nouveau régime* that Reich evokes in *Inequality for All* an upper bourgeoisie has risen to such prominence, has accumulated such wealth and power, that now they assume the mantle of a new aristocracy, an astonishingly rich, new-monied group of people who behave like a class of old feudal lords, presiding not only over particular companies, but over entire national and supra-international governments as well. At the same time, a big chunk of the middle ground has caved in, imploded, meaning middling types have slipped into the ranks of the *sans-culottes*, finding it ever more difficult to make ends meet. In the process, the top 1 per cent has decoupled itself from the rest of us and has become the parasitic bearer of merchant and rentier capital, filching profits from unequal exchanges and interest-bearing assets, as well as claims to absolute rent from class-monopoly control of urban land.

### **From the city to *la cité***

In one of the great works on the French Revolution, *The Sans-culottes* (1968), Albert Soboul points to the influence Rousseau exerted on the popular revolutionary throng, even if few had actually read his texts. Yet the *sans-culottes* weren't a class as such, Soboul says: instead they comprised artisans and small shopkeepers, modest merchants and 'journeymen [and women] day labourers – along with a bourgeois minority';<sup>3</sup> those,

we might say, who've slipped into the popular ranks and are now, in our day, beginning to know it. The *sans-culottes* represented an irresistible force, says Soboul, undergirding a coalition collectively conscious of a common aristocratic enemy; they propped up a strategic alliance that recognized a common revolutionary project. Today insurrection must rid itself of a new aristocracy without a liberal bourgeoisie stepping in in its stead. Any new revolutionary movement against our economic absolutism needs a *sans-culottes* leading the way. A passionate desire for equality might cue this militancy, drafting, en route, a new social contract. It is, however, the question of what kind of social contract this might be that I want to address here.

In *The Social Contract* (1762), near the end of the 'Social Compact' (*pacte social*) section, there's a footnote added by the author. In it, Rousseau qualifies what he means by the idea (and ideal) of *citizen*, of how it embodies a particular territorial disposition, and how, 'in modern times', 'the real meaning of the word has been almost wholly lost'.<sup>4</sup> The footnote has one of the most famously quotable lines from *The Social Contract*: 'houses make a town, but citizens make a city'. (The most famously quotable, of course, is the opening refrain: 'humans are born free; and everywhere they're in chains.') The notion that 'houses make a town, but citizens make a city' is the standard English riff on Rousseau's original French, passed down the historical line, unchanged and unchallenged. The phrase gets preceded by this musing: 'most people mistake a town for a city, and a townsman for a citizen'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in our own modern times there's something woefully inadequate about this translation; and Rousseau's concern about losing the real meaning of citizen seems more prescient than even he might have ever imagined. Worse, the standard translation hints at a certain bourgeois reappropriation and makes Rousseau's radical text sound a lot less radical than it still might be. So let's consider his original text more closely: 'la plupart prennent une ville pour une cité, et un bourgeois pour un citoyen. Ils ne savent pas que les maisons font la ville, mais que les citoyens font la cité.'<sup>6</sup> These two sentences, it's true, pose difficulty for any Anglo translator. Not least because the word 'town' doesn't really exist in French: *petite ville* is often its everyday usage, a small city, but Rousseau isn't using the word *petite ville*; he says, quite clearly, *ville*. On the other hand, *cité* has no direct equivalent in English. And yet, if we move beyond semantics and get into the spirit of Rousseau's intended meaning, the standard translation might satisfy political scientists and philosophers, but it can no longer be acceptable for radical political urbanists.

For a start, 'town' is a much too archaic term, and a much too limited (and redundant) political jurisdiction to have meaning for a contemporary reader; and so, too, is 'city' a problematic basis for a 'modern' concept of citizenship. *Cité*, though, does continue to speak politically, yet only if its domain is reconsidered imaginatively, perhaps even normatively. In that sense, here's how a contemporary urbanist, a contemporary philosopher of the urban, might recalibrate Rousseau: 'the majority [of people] take a city for the *cité* and a bourgeois for a citizen.' (Rousseau, we might note, uses the politically charged 'bourgeois' not benign 'townsman'.) He continues: people 'don't know that houses make a city, but citizens make a *cité*'. I've left this notion of *cité* untranslated for the moment, because it's the part that needs a refreshed vocabulary, a contemporary reloading. And this is what I'd like to propose and develop as a working hypothesis: 'the majority [of people] take a city for the *cité*, and a bourgeois for a citizen. They don't know that houses make a city but citizens make the urban [*la cité*].'

The urban, then, might be better suited for Rousseau's notion of *cité*: it satisfies more accurately, and more radically, a politically charged concept of citizenship that goes beyond nationality and flag waving. (*Cité*, we might equally note, raises the 'popular' spectre in bourgeois circles, pejoratively evoking *quartiers des sans-culottes*, the no-go *zones sensibles*, the global *banlieues*.) For the physical and social manifestation of our landscape, for its bricks and mortar, we have what most people would deem 'city'. But as a political ideal, as a new social contract around which citizenship



might cohere, we have something we might call ‘the urban’: a more expansive realm for which no passports are required and around which people the world over might bond. Citizenship might here be conceived as something urban, as something territorial, yet one in which territoriality is both narrower and broader than ‘city’ and ‘nationality’; a territory and citizenship without borders.

So maybe the idea of *cit * – a territory both real and ideal – satisfies the jurisdictional ideal of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*: the living space of modern democracy in the making. That’s why there are no passports for Rousseauian citizens of the urban universe, no passports for those who know they live somewhere yet *feel* they belong everywhere. Or who want to feel it. This conjoining of knowing and feeling is what engenders a sense of empathy whose nom de plume might really be citizenship itself. Here we might take the notion of ‘dwelling’ in its broadest sense: as *the totality of political and economic space in which one now belongs*. The urban helps affinity grow, helps it become aware of itself, aware that other affinities exist in the world, that affinities can encounter one another, become aware of one another as *sans-culottes*, the 99 per cent, in a social network connected by a certain tissuing, by a planetary webbing: an affinity of urban citizenship. Houses make a city, but citizens make *la cit *.

What Rousseau terms the people’s ‘general will’ today can only ever express itself within this urban [*cit *] context. The general will [*la volont  g n rale*] is the sum of urban affinities taking shape, an expression of dissatisfaction en masse, perhaps at first knowing better what this will doesn’t like, what it is against, than what it’s actually for.<sup>7</sup> At any rate, Rousseau’s logic is rather beautiful: the general will of the people, he explains, is both infallible and fallible:

The general will is always upright and always tends to the public advantage; but it doesn’t follow that the deliberations of the people always have the same rectitude. Our will is always for our own good, but we don’t always see what it is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it seem to will what is bad.<sup>8</sup>

Yet how might this general will work itself out? And how might the common urban affinities that cement people together actually develop today? Where might these affinities, and this general will, emerge? How can particular wills be made aware of themselves as something more general, as a larger collective constituency that is something greater than the sum of individual parts? What are the institutions through which affinity might develop? A direct response to these questions

might be: in the *citizens’ agora*, in the space of the urban, in the popular realm where a public might come together and express itself as a general will.

### Every revolution has its agora

The citizens’ agora is something more than the public spaces of the city; more, even, than the public institutions we once knew as public – state institutions forever under fire. One reason for this is that it isn’t clear any more just what the public domain constitutes, what it is, let alone what it might be. In our day, the public realm hasn’t so much fallen from grace as gone into wholesale tailspin. Eighty-odd years after *The Social Contract*, and almost sixty after the 9th Thermidor counter-revolution, Marx, in *The Communist Manifesto*, demonstrated what liberal bourgeois democracy had bequeathed us: ‘no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment ... drowning the most heavenly ecstasies of ... chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation’. Bourgeois society, Marx says, ‘has resolved personal [and public] worth into exchange value’, and rips away halos of every sort, converting all erstwhile hallowed and holy realms, including the public realm itself, into another money realm, into another means to accumulate capital.<sup>9</sup> Marx, in a nutshell, leaves us with the rather bleak task of picking up the pieces of what the public realm might still mean.

There’s a consequent need to redefine not an urban public realm that’s collectively owned and managed by the state, but a public realm of the *cit * that is somehow *expressive* of the people, expressive of the general will – a will, maybe, that incorporates an affinity of common notions, notions that Spinoza always insisted were not universal notions, not universal rights. Spinoza was against such an abstract conception of universality, which he thought was an *inadequate idea*. Common notions are general rather than abstract, general in their practical and contextual applicability. From this standpoint, when something is public, its channels for common expression remain open, negotiable and debatable, political and urban in the sense that they witness people encountering other people, dialoguing with other people, arguing with other people, formulating an infallible general will.

Twenty-first-century urban spaces of the *cit * will be public spaces not for reasons of pure concrete physicality or centrality, nor even because of land tenure, but because they are meeting places between virtual and physical worlds, between online and offline conversations, between online and offline encounters. Space

won't so much be divided between public and private as between *passive* or *active*; between a space that encourages active encounters of people and a space that resigns itself to passive encounters, a space that isn't so much public as the Sartrean 'practico-inert': it envelops us as passive backdrop, like dead labour functions in redundant fixed capital, as plain old bricks and mortar, as concrete and steel. For urban spaces to come alive, to be public in Rousseau's republican sense (not the Tea Party's), they need to express dynamic social relations between people, between people there and elsewhere, elsewhere in other urban spaces, creating a network of living, conjoined spaces – sovereign spaces, we might say – not dead zones that alienate and separate. Thus people in these sovereign spaces might come together to *create* a function, to talk and meet, to hang out; sometimes they'll come to protest, to express themselves in angry not tender ways. In either sense, they're not responding to a function like a crowd of shoppers. In coming together they express *active* rather than passive affects; plazas, parks, squares, streets and civic buildings become what Jeffrey Hou calls, in a contribution to the collection *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, 'insurgent public space'. '[A]s we envision the future of public space in North America and beyond,' Hou says,

it is clear that the focus of our efforts should be equally, if not more, on the making of the public than on the making of space. While space remains critical as a vehicle for actions and expressions, it is through the actions and the making of a socially and politically engaged public that the struggle for public space as a forum of political dialogues and expressions can be resuscitated and sustained.<sup>10</sup>

Following Rousseau, the 'incorruptible' Robespierre insisted that the poor have most need of ensuring its voice gets *heard*, that its needs take priority.<sup>11</sup> But to speak out, in the making of an active public of the kind that Hou articulates, there is first then a need, among other things, for a free press, or at least, in our day, for an alternative free press that reports on the sort of news items people *ought* to hear about. Today, this is clearly not the celebrity gossip and right-wing propaganda mainstream media boom out every day, at every hour, the fear and loathing peddled by the likes of Fox and News International, but other sources, often online, sometimes clandestine media. If a space to petition guarantees a citizen's right to be heard, then a free press guarantees a citizen's right to hear, to *listen* to social truths getting circulated within the *cit  *. To speak and to hear correspondingly require an urban space in which to debate and argue, and, above

all, to meet, for citizens to come together. Robespierre acknowledged the need for any democracy to allow people to assemble, to do so peaceably and without arms; although, of course, if this right is denied, if the principles of free urban assembly are opposed, then the subclause is that citizens ought to be able to assemble through any means necessary, peaceable or otherwise. It is in this space that citizens have the power to *act*, to act after being heard, to act after having listened to other citizens; mutually reinforcing public agoras, in other words – citizens' agora – as much experiential spaces as physical locations.

The dilemma here, however, is that the citizens' agora is needed either side of urban insurrection: on the one hand, it's required to put in place any revolutionary insurrection; it's instrumental, in other words, for insurrection itself, for propagandizing and organizing it, for spreading the word and for news sharing – even if, sometimes, this organization initially needs to be discreet, needs to tread cautiously in its propagation of open democracy. New social media can obviously be one component for creating a new citizens' agora. On the other hand, the day after the insurrection such an agora needs to be inscribed into any written constitution, into any actual urban social contract guaranteeing they remain the rights of all citizens. In a way, Rousseau's *Social Contract* seems better attuned, in this sense, to the post-insurrectional epoch, to the aftermath of citizens' revolutionary upheaval, when the urban carnivals are over, when the insurrection has triumphed, if it ever triumphs; 'rights-talk' beforehand isn't maybe the best means through which to *gain* one's rights. In fact, one might wonder whether the whole theme of 'rights', so prevalent again today – rights of man, right to the city (*le droit    la ville*), and so on – really helps either in changing society or in understanding how society changes. Rights-talk can inhibit rather than enable things to happen. Rights can be positive and negative depending on how you frame them politically: they are empty signifiers that need filling with content; and once you've filled them their implications are so indeterminate that opposing parties can use the same rights language to express absolutely differing positions.

*Le droit    la ville* is an unfortunate victim. At the United Nations-sponsored 'World Urban Forum', held in Rio in March 2010, the UN and the World Bank both incorporated 'the right to the city' into its charter to address the global poverty trap. On the other side of the street in Rio, at the 'Urban Social Forum', a people's popular alternative was also being staged; there activists were appalled by the ruling

class's reappropriation of such a hallowed grassroots ideal, of *its* right not *theirs*. The mainstream has now converted its own right into a tactical right that has often become a watchword for conservative rule. The Tories in Britain are quick to acknowledge people's right to self-management, happily endorsing 'community rights' and 'citizens' right to choose', since all this means the neoliberal state can desist from coughing up for public services. Self-empowerment thereby becomes tantamount to self-subsidization, to self-exploitation, to even more dispossession, mollified as 'social enterprise' and the voluntary 'third sector'.

So rights, including the right to the city, have no catch-all universal meaning in politics, nor any foundational basis in institutions; neither are they responsive to any moral or legal argument. Questions of rights are, first and foremost, questions of social power, about who *wins*. The struggle for rights isn't something 'recognized' by some higher, neutral arbiter; instead, for those people who have no rights, rights to the *cit * must be taken; they involve struggle and force. What has been taken must be reclaimed through practical action, through organized militancy, through urban insurrection. A Bill of Rights remains the ends not the means for enforcing one's democratic right. It's the joyous product not the guiding light in

the dogged process of struggle: the struggle for the new and necessary citizens' agora we have yet to invent.

## Notes

1. See Carole Cadwalladr, 'Inequality for All: Another Inconvenient Truth?', *Observer*, 2 February 2013.
2. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, pp. 137–182.
3. Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1980, p. 256.
4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole, Dent, London, 1973, p. 192.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*,  ditions Sociales, Paris, 1968, p. 68.
7. "'The people'", Peter Hallward says, 'are simply those who, in any given situation, formulate, assert and sustain a fully common (and thus fully inclusive and egalitarian) interest, over and above any divisive and exclusive interest.' 'The Will of the People: Towards a Dialectical Voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy* 155, May/June, 2009, pp. 17–29.
8. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, p. 203.
9. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm.
10. Jeffrey Hou, 'Making Public, Beyond Public Space', in Ron Shiffman et al., eds, *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, New Village Press, Oakland CA, 2012, p. 94.
11. See Maximilien Robespierre, 'Le droit de p tition', in *Robespierre: pour le bonheur et pour la libert *, La Fabrique, Paris, 2000, pp. 101–4.

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