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Planetary urbanisation: *une affaire de perception*

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that planetary urbanisation offers an antidote to the narrow-mindedness of our toxic times. It conceives planetary urbanisation as “an affair of perception,” as a vision that begins vast, at the horizon, and sees particular parts (including your own particular part) comprising an interdependent totality. To envision the world through the lens of planetary urbanisation has certain distinct advantages. After all, it’s a viewpoint expressive of commonality rather than difference, of a mutually shared planet in which people who look different, who talk different from one another, who don’t know one another, who may even hate one another, have more in common than they might think.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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In the late 1980s, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze did a series of quirky filmed interviews with Claire Parnet, a journalist at the French daily, *Libération*. Eight hours of documentary footage emerged, an *Abécédaire*, in which Deleuze extemporises on all things A to Z, Animal to Zigzag.¹ Here Deleuze is perhaps at his most fascinating best. We get a rare glimpse not only inside the life (and living room) of a notoriously media-shy thinker; we enter inside his own head, too, inside his own thought-process, watch him ad-libbing, smiling and ruminating, unrehearsed before the camera. It’s something refreshingly different from today’s canned, bland TEDx gabbling.

Deleuze is always inspiring, and I often like to watch him when I’m feeling down about the world. After the Trump election result, hot on the heels of a Brexit backlash, I decided I needed Gilles again. So I checked out his *Abécédaire*, homing in on the letter “G,” for “Gauche” – for “Left,” wondering what Left might still mean today. “What does it mean for you to be ‘Left?’” Parnet taunts Deleuze, grinning. (We can see her grinning because her hauntingly beautiful image is reflected in a mirror directly behind the philosopher.) “I’m going to tell you,” he says, “that there’s no government of the Left. A government of the Left doesn’t exist, because to be Left isn’t an affair of government.”

However, let’s start with what it means *not* to be Left, Deleuze says. This is to think of the world “a bit like your postcode. You begin with yourself...the street where you live, the city, the country, other countries further and further away.” And yet, “to be Left [*être de gauche*] is the direct opposite.” It’s to perceive the horizon, to move inwards from the outside, to imagine the planet, “the continent, your country, region, city, street...*you*.” “Left,” says Deleuze, is an affair of perceiving that horizon, of keeping your vision of yourself and the world expansive, large. It’s to live with the vastness of

the planet, with its immensity. It's to revel in this immensity, to want to understand it, to keep its frame of reference and plane of immanence open. Problems the other side of the planet are, willy-nilly, our problems, my problem.

Deleuze here isn't only offering an antidote to the pervasive narrow-mindedness and bigotry of our toxic times; he's also stressing, I think, the importance of what planetary urbanisation should be, has to be: *an affair of perception* [*une affaire de perception*], a vision that begins vast, at the horizon, and sees particular parts (including your own particular part) comprising an interdependent totality. Somehow, we're all in it together: we can either affirm or deny it, be a yes-sayer or naysayer. To be a yes-sayer is to recognise the interconnectivity of our existence, a larger, more inclusive narrative; it's to understand that the above "Somehow" requires critical interrogation not visceral abrogation.

Perhaps this is what that other French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, had in mind when he announced in 1970 the coming of "urban society."² The coming of urban society, he said, is a "revolutionary" process in which assorted ruling classes have played the lead role. It's they who've initiated the will to totalise the productive forces, to colonise and commodify land everywhere, to valorise people and nature. Just as they've fracked deep into the earth and power-drilled monetised value from nature, ruling classes have begun fracking deeply into human nature as well, power-drilling value from different aspects of our everyday life, from dwelling space, from land and housing, from the entire public realm. It's a process of creative destruction, of economic, political and ecological transformation; ongoing, bound only by the upper limits of planet earth itself.

The opening line of *The Urban Revolution* sets the tone of this transformation, uttering a bleak warning: "the complete urbanisation of society; today virtual, tomorrow real." When Lefebvre said this I don't think he was ever imagining that urbanisation would be everywhere, that concrete and bricks, freeways and highways would predominate every which way, and all green space would turn grey; nor was he saying that "cities" would quantitatively overwhelm the planet. (That's why he's radically at odds with the numbers empirics of UN-Habitat and its "Urban Age" thesis.)

Rather, he was heralding the closing of the circle of a particular form of capitalism that defines itself less through a model of industrial or agricultural production and more through the production of space. It's a system that now produces planetary geography as a commodity, as a pure financial asset, using and abusing people and places as strategies to accumulate capital. This process quite simply embroils everybody, no matter where. Urban society today is tantamount to *the progressive production of evermore frackable spatial units*. In a way, I like to think Lefebvre was hoping his thesis would become *untrue*, that the circle can't be complete, that it has to stop, or else be diverted, even if there's no going back, that urban society, like it or not, is here to stay.

Lefebvre frames this drama as fraught political struggle, full of daunting threats as well as existential possibilities. Urban society is the battle ground for new forms of radical and progressive politics; it has to be. He affirmed this not out of personal whim: capitalism affirmed it out of historical necessity, has made it our "objective" reality, the arena in which we all must now engage. "The urban problematic, urbanism as ideology and institution, urbanisation as a global tendency," Lefebvre says, "are worldwide facts. The urban revolution is a planetary phenomenon."³

Allusions to "planetary urbanisation" pepper *The Urban Revolution*. Its most explicit reference, though, comes in a valedictory essay from 1989, Lefebvre's two-page "*Quand*

la ville se perd dans une métamorphose planétaire,” published a few years before his death.⁴ Lefebvre’s precise language here is worth pondering on for a moment. Menace stalks us, he says; not so much of “planetary urbanisation” but of “the planetarisation of the urban” (“*la planétarisation de l’urbain*”). The ordering of the phrase is telling.

The urban doesn’t so much spread as it becomes the vortex for sucking in everything the planet offers: its land and wealth, its capital and power, its culture and people – its dispensable labour-power. It’s this sucking in of people and goods, of capital and information that fuels the urban machine, that makes it so dynamic as well as so destabilising, because its energising and totalising force “*expulses*” (expels) people, “*secretes*” what Lefebvre calls a “residue.” This expulsion process makes urban space expand, lets it push itself out, has it further entangle rural space, and disentangle rural life.

Lefebvre says every big system leaves a residue that escapes it, that is chewed up and spat out by it. Every whole leaves a remainder. It’s an idea most forcefully articulated in *Metaphilosophy*, Lefebvre’s dense takedown of traditional philosophy, written half-a-decade before *The Urban Revolution*.⁵ In *Metaphilosophy*, Lefebvre says that totalisations like global capitalism always exhibit leakiness; there are internal contradictions that both structure and de-structure. Totalisation can never be total. Totalisation secretes and expels a “residual element,” its Other, its shadow. There are always people who don’t fit into any whole, who don’t want to fit in, who aren’t allowed to fit in. They’re the stuff left over after all the metrics are totted up, after everything has seemingly been accounted for: *le reste* after *la somme*. They’re the philosophical anti-concepts, an affirmation of remainders, of marginal dregs, a growing constituency the world over.

Residues are remainders who live out the periphery, who feel the periphery inside them, who identify with the periphery, even if sometimes they’re located in the core. Residues exist in the world of work: precarious and downsized workers, informal and gig economy workers, petty service sector and agricultural workers – residues are workers without regularity, without salaries and security, without benefits and pensions; they’re workers without any real stake in the future of work.

Residues are refugees rejected and rebuked, profiled and patrolled no matter where they wander. They’re displacees, too, people forced off the land, thrown out of their housing (by impersonal property markets and violent eviction), whose homes have been repossessed, whose living space teeters on the geographical and economic edge. Residues come from the city as well as the countryside and congregate in a space that’s often somewhere in-between, neither traditional city nor traditional countryside. I call this somewhere in-between the *global banlieue*; I mean it literally and metaphorically, as a concrete and potential space, as a place of encounter, one not yet fully glimpsed.

Residues are odd ones out, the NINJA (No Income, No Job, No Asset) generation; Greeks who feel the brunt of the Troika austerity initiatives; dispossessed Arab and African youth in French suburbs; Detroiters beholden to “Emergency Managers”; Palestinians lobbing rocks at Israeli tanks; Rojava Kurds in northern Syria; *Indignados* on the streets of Spain; “June Days” Brazilians protesting public transport hikes; occupiers in Istanbul’s Gezi Park; Umbrella kids in Hong Kong’s Occupy Central; *Nuitards* staked out around Paris’s Place de la République. The list goes on, and on.

The spirit of *Metaphilosophy* gets worked through *The Urban Revolution*. Urban society is itself a metaphilosophical category, a will to totalise, a discontinuity within

continuity, a difference in repetition, a breakdown of old industrial society, and its supersession – its overcoming – by a new spatial form: diffusive, unbound and apparently planetary in its reach, beyond any city-rural breach. Thus a profound existential problem is displaced onto the plane of urban society where it now transpires as a complex political dilemma, an attempt to forge a new humanitarianism out of the “bad side” of capitalist development. Capitalism’s cutting edge is a bleeding edge for ordinary people.

While planetary urbanisation has to be a theory trying to figure out totalisation under contemporary capitalism, it shouldn’t itself be a totalising theory. Instead, it’s a theory of residues within a vortex, an attempt to piece together a politics of residues, a politics of remainders in the whole. Lefebvre even suggests that the political ante here is to formulate a new “revolutionary conception of citizenship.” Indeed, he says this is really what he meant by “the right to the city” all along. It’s about residues reclaiming (or claiming for the first time) their rights to a collective urban life, to an urban society they’re actively making yet are hitherto disenfranchised from: “*the right to the city implies nothing less than a revolutionary conception of citizenship.*”⁶

So many people have been pushed off-limits that it’s extended the limit of limits, created a more expansive social space for a new conception of citizenship, for a citizenship still to be invented. In this guise, citizenship lies inside and beyond a passport, inside and beyond any official documentation. It doesn’t express a legal right bestowed by any institution of the bourgeois nation-state. What we’re talking about is a citizenship without a flag, without a country, without borders.

Still, it’s clear that a lot of residues in America’s deindustrialised heartlands aren’t interested in expansive conceptions of citizenship. Nobody has ever shown them any, of course, offered them any. These residues seem content with a more reactionary kind of enfranchisement; and when somebody promises it them, they jump, vote Right, plumb for Trumpism. Now, there’s a common theme uniting the whole world: People recognising their own disenfranchisement. It has reached desperate depths. But frustration matched with vulnerability has enabled assorted demagogues (religious as well as political) to step in. Some have voiced populist ragings against the machine, created scapegoats galore, any old or new straw target, anything to further their vested interests and political ambitions. And many residues, for want of an alternative, have believed them.

I’m not sure, exactly, what debates about planetary urbanisation can do to counteract all this, let alone contribute towards an alternative positive politics. But what I do know is that any policy of parochial nest-building is doomed over the longer term, retrogressive in our age where human interconnectivity has broadened and deepened. To see the world through the lens of planetary urbanisation thus has certain distinct advantages. After all, it’s a viewpoint expressive of *commonality* rather than difference, of a mutually shared planet in which people who look different, who talk different from one another, who don’t know one another, who may even hate one another, have more in common than they might think.

That likeness is an ever-growing mutuality of disadvantage, of despair, of suffering and, perhaps, of hope. There’s affinity here even if it’s rarely acknowledged. Planetary urbanisation has to help us identify how this affinity gets recognised, how it gets mediated, undermined, upended by forces upending the planet, forces that work together, that throw everybody into a scary mix. Planetary urbanisation has to help

us create new forms of organisation, new institutions that leap across the nationalist divide. How to invent a new, more “hospitable” form of citizenship that nourishes people’s sense of identity without crushing other people’s identity? How can people – residues – express and become themselves through their connection to urban society, to the *polis*?

What’s crucial here is to reimagine this *polis* in its most expansive form. “The polis,” Hannah Arendt reminded us long ago, “properly speaking, isn’t the city-state in its physical location; it’s the organisation of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. ‘Wherever you go will be a polis’: these famous Greek words expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.”⁷

Perhaps, to conclude, we can return to Deleuze, to his *Abécédaire*. Because there’s another criterion of what it means to be Left, Deleuze says, defined not by your nature but by your “becoming” [*devenir*]: “To be Left,” he says, “is to never cease becoming a minority.” It’s to know that you’re probably never ever going to make up the majority – even if, in crude numbers, you are the majority. To be Left is to affirm your Being by Becoming a minority, alongside other minorities, to be proud of it, to wear it as your badge of honour. It’s to assemble and form an ensemble with your fellow minorities, to express your becoming out in the world together. It’s becoming a revolutionary [*devenir-révolutionnaire*] when there’s zero prospect of revolution.

Above all else, Left means to be smart enough to see through ruling class smoke screens and participate in your own process of becoming, doing it with others, forging an alternative minority community within and against the official majority community. In other words, to be Left is to create a new kind of planetary internationalism – something small and locally effective only because it knows how to think really big.

Notes

1. The interviews are available in a handsome 3 DVD Boxset: *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (Editions Montparnasse, Paris, 2004).
2. Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2003).
3. Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, p 113.
4. Henri Lefebvre, “Quand la ville se perd dans une métamorphose planétaire,” *Le monde dipolomatique*, May, 1989, pp16–7. For an English translation, see Laurent Corroyer, Marianne Potvin and Neil Brenner, “Dissolving City, Planetary Metamorphosis,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(2) 2014:203–205.
5. Lefebvre’s brilliantly suggestive text has recently been made available to Anglophones: see Henri Lefebvre, *Metaphilosophy* (Verso, London, 2016).
6. This is the last line of Lefebvre’s “Quand la ville se perd dans une métamorphose planétaire,” his last essay.
7. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958), p198.