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Editorial: Trump's inauguration of counter-revolution? More groundings

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The LA River. Photo: Andrea Gibbons.

'I'm the guy pushing a trillion-dollar infrastructure plan . . . Shipyards, ironworks, get them all jacked up. We're just going to throw it up against the wall and see if it sticks. It will be as exciting as the 1930s and greater than the Reagan revolution — conservatives, plus populists, in an economic nationalist movement.' (Stephen Bannon, quoted in Blake (2016))

'Trump . . . talks a lot about walls . . . It's an enclave mentality, a circling-the-wagons mentality that is going to continue to pillage and gather all the resources possible while there are still resources to gather – because I think they are all afraid of global warming

even as they deny it with their last breath – and deny the humanity of everyone outside those gates. It is a familiar mentality. We're seeing it all play out again in the military actions against Native American struggles for water at Standing Rock – they are fighting for all of us and the land itself and yet the government has brought in tanks.' (Andrea Gibbon (this issue))

'Immersed in a rapidly flowing stream, we stubbornly fix our eyes on the few pieces of debris still visible on the shore, while the current carries us away and propels us backward into the abyss.' (Alexis de Tocqueville (2004 [1835]: 7))

When the preceding *CITY* editorial ('Trumped? Some Groundings') set out in mid-December 2016 an interim summing-up of US President Donald Trump's 'transitional' arrangements and some possible environmental implications, it was still possible to conclude, tentatively, that we did not necessarily face a 'situation of extraordinary continuing turmoil.'

However, we introduced, in opposition to that tentative conclusion, as our first epigraph there, a passage from Noam Chomsky's almost immediate, deeply challenging response to the election results and to the report of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) on climate change delivered on the same day, November 8th:

The election outcome placed total control of the government – executive, Congress, the Supreme Court – in the hands of the Republican Party, which has become the most dangerous organization in world history ... The Party is dedicated to racing as rapidly as possible to destruction of organized human life.

(Polychroniou 2016)

In the light of only a few months' experience of the emerging Trump regime, there is, by now, April 2017, enough qualitative mainstream, specialist and journalistic reporting and analysis to begin to evaluate Chomsky's overlapping contentions.

With regard to his first contention, Republican control of the government – though patchy, confusing, zig-zagging between various positions, recently challenged in the streets as well as in some professional chambers, channels and courts – is emerging and beginning to *simultaneously falter and accelerate*. The Trump-appointed leadership of Bannon (though now apparently distanced), Mathis ('Mad Dog') and Tillerson has begun to take form and make decisions, supported – but not always supported – by a crowd of unpredictable extras with the continuing role of

Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House of Representatives but now, it seems, as an at times head waiter at the banquets and behind the scenes. And then there is the Master himself, Trump. Of a recent episode, as the news leaked out of the White House, it was reported in the *Washington Post* that 'Trump was mad — steaming, raging mad' (Rucker, Costa, and Parker 2017).

The *Washington Post's* tone and focus changed slightly in a later edition. Madness disappeared and was replaced by impatience:

At the center of the turmoil in the White House is an impatient president frustrated by his administration's inability to erase the impression that his campaign was engaged with Russia, to stem leaks or to implement any signature achievements.'

What was happening was perhaps exaggerated in the first version of the report. But in the world of Trump's pantomimes, Stephen Bannon's jacked-up realities and of Kellyanne Conway's 'alternative facts', it is not easy to find 'le mot juste'.

As to Chomsky's second contention, action on *climate change* is marginalised when/where it is not yet up for reversal.

Though apparently premature at the time and over-stated, Chomsky's contentions seem to be holding up. The more evidently *social dimension* of his forecast, refining it a little in the light of subsequent events, is taking the form of the control of the government in the hands of a plutocratic, military, technicist/professional, and promotional elite operating within the Republican Party. The process is well described, in Naomi Klein's words, as 'a corporate takeover'. But more than that, it is *a form of regime change*, occasioned, on the one hand, by an uneven, but nevertheless capitalism-threatening, humanitarian long revolution and, on the other, challenged and supplanted, bit by bit, by the attempted *inauguration of another stage, possibly decisive, of a long counter-revolution, much deeper than a mere coup*.

The notion of the long revolution was, of course, introduced by Raymond Williams' book of that name (1961), but explicitly he referred only to a counter-revolution, a short one, in his last book, *Towards 2000* (1983), where he refers to the somewhat mysterious, threatening and looming presence of 'Plan X'. His description of it does anticipate and fit our current situation:

'... it will be a period in which after a quarter of a century of both real and manufactured expectations, there will be a long series of harshly administered checks; of deliberately organised reductions of conditions and chances; of intensively prepared emergencies of war and disorder, offering only crude programmes of rearmament, surveillance and mutual hostile controls ...' (Williams 1983: 218)

It is surely this counter-revolution¹ which is becoming, in human and planetary terms, 'the most dangerous organization in world history'. Signs of it can be detected in the continuing relevance of some studies assembled here and in our previous editorial and issue, this: the oncoming stage, the latest phase, of that long-coming counter-revolution that has the potential to increasingly endanger organised human life. Here we make particular reference to the counter-revolution's established territorial and institutional formations and practices and their environmental *groundings* – that is, on the one hand, to urban/rural settlements and patterns of more 'material' economic production, including infrastructure, and, on the other, to climate, water and rivers.

Living in an Unprecedented Time

A journalistic-style recap of 2016 as 'the year that was' would undoubtedly declare it an unprecedented year, noting the series of unforeseen human and natural 'catastrophes' including the Brexit referendum in the UK and the US Presidential Elections as well as extreme weather disturbances related largely to the culmination of a very strong El Niño

(2014–16). A sense of the unprecedented was heightened by an intricate weaving of actions – cutting across the socio-physical – whose overlapping influences did not allow for a simple chronological ordering of 2016, underlining instead a denaturalisation of the present based on the radical incommensurability of the past (Steinmetz 2005). Hinging on a non-teleological understanding of *the event* as theorised by the French philosopher Alain Badiou, what marked 2016 were not mundane, structure-reproducing occurrences but a series of radically, transforming conjunctures that were simultaneously contingent and discontinuous. Their significance was not only due to the way they could irrevocably alter the situation within which they were taking place, but also because they sought to go beyond being a state of exception to imply a new logic based on the rewriting of existing rules. It would be sheer folly to misread these unprecedented events as unpredictable or a loose cannon, for they cannot be explained by simply studying the past but involve a more radical rethinking of the way we are historical. This is not only about literally making 'space' for time but also recasting the human-nature relationship, as the rise of the Anthropocene as a discourse has revealed. But in placing the human and the planet at the centre of the project of writing history, we need to be aware that we are doing so amidst a rising culture of anti-intellectualism, as the persistent backlash against the science of climate change shows.

This is something Arabindoo highlights in this issue when she questions the scientific rigour of the 100-year flood rationale as politicians and policy makers wilfully allow a persistent public misunderstanding of its temporal probability. There is an irony here for, as Chomsky noted in the interview already referred to, on the same day that Americans voted Trump to power, the World Meteorological Organisation delivered a report at the COP22 Summit in Morocco highlighting the dire consequences of global warming. This was more than

forecasting, as 2016 proved to be the hottest year on record. The last time the planet was this warm was 115,000 years ago. And yet, political commitments remain flimsy, crumbling too easily as seen in the way Trump, in his first week in office, signed a memo reopening the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline project as well as building a tar sands oil pipeline linking Alberta in Canada and the Gulf Coast. While this is not quite the eco-fascism that de Souza talks about in his article in this issue, it shows that progressive rehabilitation of eco-geopolitics is extremely difficult, especially when the Army Corps is involved. At least when it comes to cities, its militarisation of the urban question is clearly linked to environmental security, one that privileges the perpetuation of environmental injustice under the guise of environmental protection (de Souza in this issue).

What is unprecedented here is the way past, present and future are deliberated disconnected from each other and placed beyond the grasp of historical sensibility, allowing environmental concerns to become a convenient ordering tool and a pretext for brutal state action against the urban poor, i.e. evictions as observed by Arabindoo, de Souza and Andrea Gibbons (later in this issue) in the context of eco-politics in Chennai, Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles respectively. Even though there is a long-standing genealogy of state violence against the urban poor, there is something unprecedented about the way notions of risk cut across the social and natural sciences to embody more than a sense of threats. There is a vagueness here that is carefully cultivated by the current culture of governing through tweeting (Trump again), and where the environmental subject is highly compromised (see Arabindoo).

The bigger concern here is not so much the bruising our human egos have taken with the turn of events and our inability to predict them, but the fact that they actually portend a precedent for things to come and whose consequences are still not clear. Organising

any kind of counter socio-political practices in this context will be more than an uphill task. Especially when one of the dubious honours bestowed on 2016 was the selection of 'post-truth' by Oxford Dictionaries as the international word of the year. This is the proverbial opening of another can of worms, one that will need to be explored in the forthcoming issues as will the way we investigate and write (see Dimtris Dalakoglou, Andrea Gibbons and the interview with her, later in this issue).

Placing the attempted counter-revolution

We give attention here to the *environmental dimension* of this counter-revolution, its geo-spatial threat to organised human life, with particular reference to its groundings – in this case, to climate, water and rivers, to the notion of infrastructures (given, j effect, a bio-cultural twist by Dalakoglou), and to particular urban and rural settlements, notably in Los Angeles and Native American ones (the Standing Rock movement is *not* necessarily over).

We classify the material assembled and/or referred to here (with sometimes only very brief, attention to some items on this occasion), using two relatively informal categories. First, established disciplinary perspectives, some of which are reaching out beyond their traditional limits; and second, supplementary and/or transdisciplinary perspectives.

The first of these headings introduces four perspectives (three, as it happens, from geography, and the fourth from anthropology) on what are put forward as key explorations for understanding Trump's inauguration of counter-revolution. One of these, Andrea Gibbons' doctoral research (an edited extract is included as a paper in our first section as 'Linking Race, the Value of Land and the Value of Life') is succeeded later by Gibbons, interviewed by Debbie Humphry, in an experiential and partly fictive

exploration, 'From LA to Standing Rock and Beyond: a holistic reading of confluences'.

Gibbons' reading of the Native American struggles was supported at the time by a remarkable flurry of deep journalistic (in fact transdisciplinary) writing by Rebecca Solnit and others. Particularly outstanding was Solnit's 'Standing Rock protests: this is only the beginning' (2016). The whole article is immensely valuable but two paragraphs are of central relevance to this issue of *CITY* and to the choice of title for the Gibbons-Humphry interview:

'The fight is about water and rights. The Missouri is the longest river in the United States, joining the Mississippi at St Louis; any pollution caused by a spill from the DAPL on its current route would impact the reservation first but would continue downstream all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. It would impact a huge swathe of the agriculture and residents at the center of the continent. You could also note that the Missouri and Mississippi meet close to where a police officer killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, a suburb of St Louis, the event that prompted the formation of Black Lives Matter (members of which were also at the camp showing solidarity). The river goes onward to flow past New Orleans, where the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina turned into the unnatural disaster of a city blockaded and its citizens shot down and stranded by the authorities. Histories flow together.'

'What's happening at Standing Rock feels like a new civil rights movement that takes place at the confluence of environmental and human rights and grows from the last 60 years of lived experience in popular power and changing the world. This is already a movement with national solidarity – there were support demonstrations in San Francisco and Tulsa, Oklahoma, among other places ...' (Solnit 2016)

Gibbons explains how we can see these recent and ongoing protests as urban and rural – planetary, in fact – struggles.

Returning to our epigraphs, the 'trillion-dollar infrastructure plan' of the first quote could indeed be 'greater than the Reagan

revolution' if it is associated with a militarised intensification of the 'pillaging and gathering' and denial of humanity to which Gibbons refers. The notion that to some extent the counter-revolution is a massive extension, indeed a new paradigmatic version of existing tendencies within late capitalism, can be grasped through a comparison between Steve Bannon's extreme constructive/destructive vision of his trillion-dollar infrastructure plan as compared with common police practice in LA today, as noted by one of Gibbons' informants.

The visionary sighting of travellers in an abyss-threatened boat – the third epigraph – was presented by the great French nineteenth-century sociologist, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his major and influential study, *Democracy in America*. It lived on to inspire, if not artist Paul Klee's seminal drawing 'Angelus Novus', certainly Walter Benjamin, the twentieth century critical theorist and writer, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History':

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating ... This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise ... The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1968 [1940] 257–258)²

Tocqueville's original returned, as a long epigraph, in an influential book published last year in the USA, by Yuval Levin, founder and editor of the conservative (non-Trumpite) journal *National Affairs*, in his book *Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (2016). The sense of an abyss, present and impending, that has to be overcome, is not uncommon.

In J.D.Vance's widely read and much discussed study *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016). Vance, a member himself of that severely depressed, ethnically Scots-Irish community concentrated in Greater Appalachia, recalls the intense, threatening insecurity of his own growing up, and concludes, 'Thinking about it now, about how close I was to the abyss, gives me chills' (253).

The plan for jacked-up infrastructure. The struggle for oil or water conducted within military-appropriated enclaves. Abandoned travellers on an abyss-threatened boat. A toy-clown stranded on a stake mid-stream near a bridge. Actual and/or potential victims of some manic infrastructural planners...: Individually and cumulatively, they can be seen as images of our not-to-be-accepted future.

A river has to be so much more than a commodity. So, too, land, humanity, the planet. Without such flowering, the abyss.

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Notes

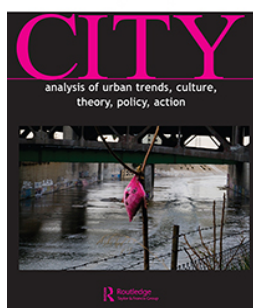
- 1 The notion of the counter-revolution (presented here as a long rather than a short one) becomes more evident in Jim McGuigan's edition (Williams 2015) of *Towards 2000*.

- 2 Klee's drawing has been reproduced tellingly in Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller* (2016).

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Urban eco-geopolitics


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Urban eco-geopolitics

Rio de Janeiro's paradigmatic case and its global context

Marcelo Lopes de Souza

Geopolitics should be understood as a broader subject than the usual association 'nation-states + international relations + military power + geographical conditions' suggests. Actually, 'geopolitics' is nothing but an explicitly political approach to social-spatial analysis, even if we pragmatically reserve the term for situations in which we face state interventions and strategies aiming at socio-spatial control and/or expanding political influence. Similar to the Copenhagen School's 'wider agenda' for security studies, I think it is useful to develop a 'wider agenda' for the critique of geopolitics—for instance, one that clearly incorporates some urban problems as relevant subjects. 'Eco-geopolitics' refers to the governmentalisation of 'nature' and the 'environment', using the 'environmental protection' and often even the 'environmental security' discourse as a tool for socio-spatial control. Within the framework of this governmentalisation, there are increasing connections between local-level expressions of socio-spatial control in the name of 'environmental protection' and national and global agents and agendas. More concretely, 'urban eco-geopolitics' is above all related to strategies of socio-spatial control apparently designed to prevent people from 'degrading the environment', though in fact they have several social and spatial implications. Rio de Janeiro is here nothing but an illustration of a very general phenomenon. Nonetheless, Rio is a 'privileged laboratory' due to an almost unique conjunction of factors: (a) a proverbial 'abundance of nature' (i.e. a huge national park inside the heart of the metropolis); (b) a similarly proverbial socio-spatial inequality (hundreds of favelas coexist with elite neighbourhoods in the context of a complex segregation pattern that also includes a huge periphery and an extreme socio-spatial stigmatisation); (c) a 'modernising drive' that has significantly changed Rio's urban space several times since the beginning of the 20th century, being recently represented by the direct or indirect effects of the 'sporting mega-events fever' that has dominated Rio's city marketing since the last decade.

Key words: geopolitics, ecology, environmental justice, cities, Rio de Janeiro

1. Introduction: from the nature of geopolitics to the 'geopolitics of nature'

Some authors have tried to direct our attention to the fact that geopolitics—in spite of the curse that seems to accompany this word since the rise of Nazi geopolitics in the 1920s or even since

it was coined by Rudolf Kjellén in the previous decade—should be understood as a broader subject than the usual association 'nation-states + international relations + military power + geographical conditions' suggests. In so doing, they have (in various ways) advocated the two-fold thesis according to which the subject of geopolitics is

much more diverse than most people imagine, and that the political contents of geopolitics are not necessarily conservative.

Both claims were made by Yves Lacoste in France as early as the 1970s and 1980s. In the enlarged edition of his famous book *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre*, Lacoste (2014) offers a very synthetic definition that is very symptomatic: considering the word *géopolitique* in its 'strong sense' (*sens fort*),

'it is a matter of relations between precisely localised political forces, whether official or clandestine: bloody struggles between ethnic groups or religious factions, wars between nations, the fight of a people for their independence, threats of conflict between major states'.¹ (231)

He immediately adds that 'in the original sense of the term' ('au sens fondateur du terme'), it comprises 'the rivalries between powers over a territory, whether large or small, even those included in urban agglomerations'² (Lacoste 2014, 231).

However, it is important to deal separately with those two claims mentioned in the first paragraph: (1) the subject of geopolitics is much more diverse than most people imagine; (2) the political contents of geopolitics are not necessarily conservative. It is not necessary that we agree on both at the same time.

Although I sympathise in principle with the idea that taken at an abstract level 'geopolitics' is nothing but an explicitly political approach to social-spatial analysis—and considering that 'power' and everything that is 'political' can be either heteronomous or autonomous according to the circumstances (see Castoriadis 1983, 1990; Souza 2006, 2012a), this would imply that the spatial practices of a multiplicity of agents and purposes could be seen as 'geopolitical', including, say, emancipatory social movements. But recognising the pluriscalarity of geopolitics is one thing, espousing a view that we can cultivate some kind of 'radical' geopolitics (similar to what some anglophone researchers have done with another 'suspicious' subject,

criminology) is quite a different one. Sure, there are other authors (especially Anglo-Saxon ones) who have recently suggested a similar kind of 'rehabilitation' from a progressive point of view, even suggesting terms such as 'alter-geopolitics' (we should not forget that Lacoste already used a similar expression *d'autres géopolitiques* three decades ago). However, other efforts aiming at refreshing the study of geopolitics have been less flexible and perhaps more realistic. Even a geographer like Gearóid Ó Tuathail, who has praised Lacoste and acknowledged his pioneering role, advocates a 'critical geopolitics' more as a critical approach to the subject than as a kind of 'progressive rehabilitation', even if he describes his works as 'works of geopolitics with a radical agenda' (Ó Tuathail 1996, 20). It is no accident that he emphasises the subject of geopolitics as being (here he quotes an earlier work co-authored with John Agnew) 'the study of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states' (Ó Tuathail 1996, 60). In so doing, he inextricably links geopolitics with statecraft.

I definitely do not go as far as Lacoste and other geographers who have tried to 'rehabilitate' geopolitical analysis or the word 'geopolitics', as much as I understand and partly share their arguments. I do not believe that speaking about 'critical geopolitics' (beyond the strict sense of a *critique of geopolitics*) or 'alter-geopolitics' is a promising task, due to the fact that it is extremely difficult to liberate the term from its conservative meaning. The very limited success of Lacoste's efforts in this direction after four decades is probably strong evidence in favour of my point. For this reason, I pragmatically think that we should reserve the term for situations in which we face *state interventions and strategies aiming at socio-spatial control and/or expanding political influence*.

Nevertheless, we should also admit (equally for pragmatic reasons) that we are witnessing an increasing interconnectedness of several levels of action; contemporary 'governmentality' (to use Michel Foucault's

term) is essentially pluriscalar, and sooner or later we can discover or realise both the supra-local political relevance of the local level for purposes of 'national security' and the local political effects of national and even international/global political and strategic agendas. Similar to 'biopolitics'—a concept explored by Foucault but actually coined by Rudolf Kjellén—geopolitics cannot be held captive by a poor understanding of the role and complexity of geographical scale in the contemporary world. At this point, an approach such as that of Ó Tuathail (1996)—who clearly privileges an understanding of 'geopolitics' as a 'spatialization of the global political scene' (68)—seems to be too restrictive, too narrow. Instead, I advocate a view similar to that proposed by the Copenhagen School in relation to security studies, by defining 'security' and 'securitization' no longer as something restricted to military issues and traditional 'national security' actors (Buzan et al. 1998). Similar to their 'wider agenda' for security studies, I think it is useful to develop a 'wider agenda' for the critique of geopolitics—for instance, one that clearly incorporates some urban problems as relevant subjects.

Actually, cities and urbanisation have always been present as subjects in the context of geopolitical thought—from the very beginning. As early as the 1930s, several articles published in the German geopolitical journal *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* showed how (negatively) relevant urban growth and an increasing urbanisation rate were in the eyes of Third Reich geopoliticians, who cultivated a clearly 'urbanophobic' approach to cities within the framework of their reactionary worldview (see, e.g. Burgdörfer 1933; Harmsen 1933a, 1933b; A. Haushofer 1933; K. Haushofer 1933; Hellpach 1936). However, even if some later contributions to geopolitical analysis—often from a critical viewpoint—paid great attention to cities and urbanisation (such as José W. Vesentini's [1987] book about Brasília and its geopolitical meaning and role), the term 'geopolitics' has remained basically

connected with geographical scales other than the local one in the public imagination and in the mainstream discourse about geopolitical subjects and problems.

Geography—and socio-spatial research in general—has failed until recently to recognise that allusions to 'urban planning' and 'urban management' are probably not enough to adequately explain the context of several types of practice of socio-spatial control in an increasing number of situations. Urban planning almost always officially aimed at value-neutrality, thus repressing its political dimension; however, as planning is always about politics and power (the state apparatus and its planners do not plan only 'things' but ultimately *social relations*), there is a political dimension related to geographical space that is potentially a *geopolitical* one, at least in the case of state-sponsored planning. Although 'urban planning' and 'urban geopolitics' usually refer to the same concrete reality—the organisation of space aiming at social control and the consolidation and expansion of power by means of producing space in specific ways—urban planning experts are by no means the sole ones in urban geopolitical strategies. On the contrary. That becomes clear when we consider cases such as the interplay between urban space reshaping and strategies related to what has been called 'low-intensity urban warfare'; there are also other, less dramatic examples, however.

First attempts to show the links between local state actions and socio-spatial control while paying attention to aspects such as the role of the military and 'national security' concerns and discourse have been made in the last 20 or so years, be it in connection with the analysis of the 'militarisation of the urban question' in the context of a 'war against crime' in the Global South (Souza 2008, 2013, 2014), be it in connection with analyses of counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism measures amidst 'low-intensity urban warfare'/'urban low-intensity conflict' in the Global North or in countries occupied by imperialistic powers (Graham 2004, 2010).

In these cases, it is clear that government attempts to intervene in land-use regulation, urban accessibility and even aspects of the built environment cannot be reduced to the traditional scope of urban planning, and especially not to the usual concerns and efforts of the planning professions or planning staff of local administrations. The local level obviously has a supra-local importance in such cases—a *geopolitical importance*.

A further, perhaps bold step is the one I would like to make in this paper: not only in strategies developed for purposes related to the ‘war on drugs’ (or against crime in general) or to fighting counter-insurgency and terrorism (and sooner or later emancipatory social movements, we must add) can be found a geopolitical dimension. It is not difficult to argue about geopolitical aspects and implications when we consider situations in which armed forces are directly involved and the national and international levels are sometimes explicitly combined with the local level in order to produce some specific outcome in terms of socio-spatial control, as it has been the case with the Rio de Janeiro–Port-au-Prince connection within the framework of Brazil’s ‘peace-keeping’ mission in Haiti, during which Port-au-Prince’s poor neighbourhoods have been used as ‘laboratories’ for Brazilian armed forces aiming at improving their skills to be later used in Brazil’s *favelas* (actually the armed forces have been already deployed to fight drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro’s *favelas* from time to time since the 1990s). However, what about strategies of socio-spatial control apparently designed ‘only’ to prevent people (more specifically poor people) from ‘degrading the environment’, without any clear direct link with military actions or supra-local scales? Even if it is legitimate to speak about ‘urban geopolitics’ in certain situations, do we go too far when we use a term such as ‘urban *eco*-geopolitics’?

I think there are some reasons to argue even in relation to social–environmental problems that we are facing challenges and problems that go beyond the traditional sphere of

urban planning sometimes. From classical geopolitics to non-conventional geopolitics, the subject is always about space and (heteronomous) power. Social struggle and state interventions (including military ones) around environmental problems are hardly considered as strange to the domain of ‘geopolitics’ nowadays; it suffices to see the importance of what has been called ‘geopolitics of energy’ and the struggles about vital resources such as water. Unfortunately, these problems and challenges have been explicitly perceived as linked to geopolitical strategies only at a limited number of scales—more or less the traditional levels of geopolitical strategising, namely, the national and international ones. ‘Eco-geopolitics’ refers to the *governmentalisation of ‘nature’ and the ‘environment’*, using the ‘environmental protection’ and often even the ‘environmental security’ discourse as a tool for socio-spatial control. Within the framework of this governmentalisation, there are increasing connections between local-level expressions of socio-spatial control in the name of ‘environmental protection’/‘environmental security’ and national and global agents and agendas.

Sure, a clear link between ‘environmental protection’/‘environmental security’ and ‘militarisation of the urban question’ is still not in sight in Rio de Janeiro, in contrast to the links between the ‘war on crime’ and interventions of the army I briefly mentioned before. Nonetheless, I do not believe I am exaggerating if I hypothesise that the enforcement of ‘environmental protection’/‘environmental security’ (sometimes but not necessarily more or less as just an excuse to promote segregation, gentrification, etc.) will be often achieved by using not only police force but even the military in the future, in a way that truly deserves what Michel Bosquet (and later Murray Bookchin) called ‘eco-fascism’ a long time ago. All of that has been scarcely examined by geographers. It is a plausible scenario for a perhaps not too remote future.³ And this scenario goes beyond ‘urban planning’ in its ordinary sense. It possesses a strong *geopolitical*

dimension. The importance of urban eco-geopolitics will surely increase in years to come.

Within this framework of a critique of geopolitics, a further aim of this paper is to provide a clear understanding of the *inherently ambivalent* character of ‘ecology’. ‘Ecology’ and ‘ecological’ arguments are in principle neither ‘good’ (in the sense of ‘socially progressive’) nor ‘bad’ (or ‘socially regressive’); ‘ecology’ (and more specifically ‘environmental protection’) is a concern that can be moulded to serve different and even antagonistic purposes. That is not to say that it is ‘neutral’; I am just stressing the fact that the ethical and political contents and implications of ‘environmental protection’ and other ‘ecological’ concepts and goals can considerably vary, being dependent of the political–philosophical framework within which we accept or refuse particular values and principles as well as of the concrete embeddedness of social agents in terms of class, culture, geography and history.

As far as ‘environmental protection’ is concerned, we should always ask Cicero’s famous question: *cui bono* (= to whose benefit?). Very much in the spirit of this Latin adage, used to suggest that there is a hidden motive for something, in many cases we can presuppose that behind concerns about ‘environmental protection’ in the name of the ‘common good’ and ‘in the public interest’ lie private and governmental interests that can be very much contradictory to social justice. In fact, we can see that under the banner of ‘ecology’ the discourse of ‘environmental protection’ is often instrumentalised against the poor, as Rio de Janeiro exemplifies.

It must be clear that Rio de Janeiro is here nothing but an *illustration* of a very general phenomenon, full of theoretical and political implications. Nonetheless, Rio de Janeiro is a ‘privileged laboratory’ due to an almost unique conjunction of factors: (a) a proverbial ‘abundance of nature’ (a huge national park inside the heart of the metropolis, proverbially wonderful beaches, nice lagoons, impressive mangrove and *restinga* environments, etc.); (b) a similarly proverbial

socio-spatial inequality (hundreds of *favelas* coexist with elite neighbourhoods in the context of a complex segregation pattern that also includes a huge periphery and an extreme socio-spatial stigmatisation); (c) a ‘modernising drive’ that has significantly changed Rio’s urban space several times since the beginning of the 20th century, being recently represented by the direct or indirect effects of the ‘sporting mega-events fever’ (related to the Pan-American Games in 2007, the Soccer World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games that took place in 2016) that has dominated Rio’s city marketing since the last decade.

In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly discuss the concept of ‘(environmental) risk’ and its ideological uses (Section 2); thereafter, I will examine the case of Rio de Janeiro, particularly showing how it exemplifies what I call ‘gentrifying conservationism’ (Section 3); finally, I wish to put Rio de Janeiro’s case into context, arguing that far from being an isolated case it actually corresponds to a vantage point from which we can observe trends that are ongoing worldwide (Section 4).

2. Environmental injustice in the name of environmental protection? The discourse about ‘risk’ and its instrumentalisation

‘Risk’ is no longer a term used almost exclusively by environmental and Earth scientists and civil engineers. It has become an important concept in the vocabulary of social scientists and urbanists—and by no means exclusively in the context of those activities related to urban planning and management and, of course, in the very documents (laws and ordinances, zoning maps, etc.) that embody the guidelines of urban planning and management. Especially since Ulrich Beck (1986) published his seminal book about the ‘risk society’ back in the 1980s, social scientists began to pay unprecedented attention to this subject (for recent contributions, see Freudenburg et al. 2009; Tierney 2014). However, social geographers

did not wait for sociological reflections such as Beck's in order to make their contributions; in the wake of the growing interest on environmental perceptions among geographers, interesting (and partly critical) contributions to the discussion of 'risk' and of what it socially/politically means and implies have been made by some geographers particularly since the 1980s (see, i.e. Hewitt 1983). Be that as it may, both social geographers and other social researchers tend to see and use this concept in a different way when compared to natural scientists and engineers.

As everybody knows, 'risk' has to do with danger, with threat. That is common sense. The *Oxford Dictionary*, for instance, defines 'risk' as 'a chance or possibility of danger, loss, injury or other adverse consequences'. The Brazilian *Houaiss Electronic Dictionary of the Portuguese Language* offers as first meaning an even more specific definition for the word: the 'likelihood of danger, usually with physical threat to man and/or the environment', while the second meaning is the 'probability of failure of something, due to a contingent and uncertain event, whose occurrence does not depend solely on the will of the involved people'.

Specifically in the case of 'environmental risk', it is worth asking, however: danger or threat *to whom* or *to what*? The question is less trivial than it may appear at first glance (or from a typical engineering perspective).

Although 'environmental risk' is a technical term very often used by those academic studies that intellectually support urban planning and management, it is implicitly used in two senses that are never explicitly discussed (not to mention *critically* discussed). Thus, it is necessary to distinguish now between two often interrelated but different types of 'environmental risk'. The first refers to what can be called *spaces that present a risk*; the second concerns what can be termed *spaces that represent a risk*.

A space that '*presents* a risk' is one within whose boundaries we can supposedly find processes and dynamics that embody a risk of a catastrophic and tragic event for the

people living or working there. The most typical examples in tropical areas are the places regarded as vulnerable in terms of the likelihood of landslides or floods. The human beings living or working there find themselves often 'at risk' under such circumstances, especially under conditions of so-called 'extreme weather events'.

A space that '*represents* a risk', in contrast, is one that due to the activities and dynamics that take place there seems to constitute a risk to others: namely, to the surroundings or even to distant sites.

Spaces that 'present a risk' are often the target of a negatively discriminatory treatment in those cases in which they are at the same time segregated (and therefore stigmatised) spaces—a situation that in Brazil mainly corresponds to *favelas*. Frequently, people living in those (supposedly high-risk) areas are depicted by the mass media and government officials as bearing the blame for the tragedies that follow so-called 'natural disasters', regardless of their very limited palette of locational choices (consequence of their low income). *Favela* inhabitants, hence, bear witness to a flagrant situation of *environmental injustice*: in addition to the fact that they already suffer privation and stigmatisation due to those conditions of exploitation and oppression (poverty and other factors) that more or less directly push them to places environmentally less adequate and sometimes even unhealthy, they also pay the price of the lack of legal security of tenure and threats of removal on the part of the state apparatus, even after generations of consolidated settlement at a specific place. At the same time, we can verify that bourgeois or middle-class residences that are located in problematic areas from the perspective of various types of environmental risk are often not given the same discriminatory treatment and generally rely on heavy state investments to stabilise slopes, among other measures.

Terms such as 'natural hazard' and 'natural disaster' are closely related to 'environmental risk'. As Cooke and Doornkamp (1974, 128) underlined a long time ago (referring

specifically to landslides, though the thought has a very general reach), '[a] disaster is said to occur only if landsliding takes place in an area where man lives or works, though there are landslides in uninhabited areas'. Interestingly, however, most geomorphologists and other natural scientists keep talking about 'natural disasters' without being able to see that behind terms such as 'human', 'population', etc. it is necessary to see the fractures, contradictions and conflicts of a structurally heterogeneous society. Without understanding the different roles and conditions of different social classes and groups in terms of status and decision-making power, as well as the asymmetric distribution of economic gains and costs within the framework of a hierarchical society, references to 'anthropic factors', 'human-induced disasters' and the like cannot but conceal the ultimate causes of many tragedies and therefore the social context in which disasters are to a large extent *socially* produced.

But also those spaces that 'represent' a risk often exemplify the idea that there is a socially asymmetric and non-isonomic treatment of different situations by the state apparatus and corporate media. The 'risk' in this case is something directly related to some specific social group(s) and their way of life: for example, the 'risk' that an expanding *favela* can lead to deforestation, so adversely affecting the flora and fauna biodiversity. It should not be difficult to see that behind it there is not only hype in many situations: there is also a class prejudice and often probably also a racial prejudice. According to this biased view, a *favela*, informal and poor, 'makes (the landscape) ugly', while petty bourgeois and bourgeois (= middle- and upper-class) residences instead usually 'beautify' the landscape. 'Disorder' vs. 'order'; 'ugliness' vs. 'beauty'; 'civilisation' vs. 'barbarism'. The formal occupation of space, inextricably linked with domestic (or industrial) sewage dump *in natura* in Rio de Janeiro's lagoons and the waters of Guanabara Bay, with the destruction of whole ecosystems (beaches, salt marsh and mangrove), with the

deforestation of hillsides, with the dismantling of hills and so on, is linked, in the dominant imaginary, with 'progress' and 'urban development'. All that is not 'risk', but rather expressions and inevitable 'collateral damages' of modernity. On the other hand, the *favela* is not only a symbol of unsafety and violence but also of 'environmental damage' and 'environmental destruction'.

Delenda est Carthago: 'Carthage must be destroyed.' With this phrase Cato the Elder ended almost all his speeches in the Roman Senate at the time of the Punic Wars to remind his countrymen that Carthage continued to be a threat against Rome and their interests (or, in other words, a 'risk'). *Delenda est favela* could well be the mantra eventually adopted by the state apparatus in Rio de Janeiro and in many other places in Brazil and in other countries. In most cases, the main reason, of course, would be the 'risk' from the perspective of public safety concerns, considered from the viewpoint of self-victimising middle classes. The middle classes play the victims while closing their eyes to the deepest causes of the social question—causes that precisely feed the social tensions back all the time in our 'cities of fear' ('phobopolises': Souza 2008, 2013, 2014). In many situations, however, the 'environmental risk' that certain spaces allegedly *present* is a convenient pretext for evictions, to which another one is occasionally added: that of 'environmental risk' that certain spaces (read: the people living in these spaces) supposedly *represent*.

It is obvious, however, that the desire to eradicate the *favelas* from the landscape is doomed to never be fully satisfied. It is hindered by more than just socio-political obstacles: without the *favelas*, an essential part of what enables the urban economy in the cities of (semi)peripheral capitalism simply could not exist. The (hyper)precarious and low-cost housing, located in segregated spaces (often near the workplace), is a *sine qua non* condition for the real wages of the mass of poor urban workers to remain at a low level. And so the relationship of the so-

called 'formal city' with the *favelas* is based on hypocrisy and even cynicism, causing a self-serving tolerance and a clear negative discrimination (and often even repression) to blend schizophrenically.

To avoid a misunderstanding, let me explain that I am by no means suggesting that 'risk' is something like a mere ideological invention or a pure product of human subjectivity. Beneath all (inter)subjective aspects and judgements inherent to perceptions that can vary according to socio-geographical and historical circumstances lies an 'objective' stratum of processes that require specific natural science methods and techniques to be understood and estimated—in other words, beyond the reach of social science methods such as critical discourse analysis. That is to say, despite my social constructionist sympathies I do not go as far as to deny that landslides and floods (or what we call landslides and floods) actually occur in an 'objective' sense (regardless of the fact that even natural science methods and concepts are socio-geographically and historically situated intellectual artefacts and therefore everything but neutral and 'purely objective' tools). Moreover, the understanding that human tragedies materially caused by landslides, floods, etc. have deeper causes related to social structures and processes (i.e. residential segregation and environmental injustice) does not suppress the fact that natural hazards and environmental disasters (very often triggered or induced by social processes) can be the immediate cause of losses of lives and patrimony. To ignore that the dangerousness of risks can be estimated and better understood with the help of environmental and Earth science methods would amount to foolishness and an incredible irresponsibility. I am just trying to stress a fact frequently neglected by natural scientists and engineers: behind the environmental risk discourse there are very often important political projects and economic interests at work, which in cases such as Rio de Janeiro's are oriented towards as much gentrification as possible. More often than not environmental risk has

been used as a convenient *excuse* to remove poor settlements and evict low-income people from areas regarded as promising from the perspective of the real estate and construction industry.

If there is a relevant danger related to landslide risk, for instance, the affected people have the right to be not only informed and warned, but also properly supported on a truly democratic, non-authoritarian basis. From the viewpoint of environmental justice and social justice in general, the principles of distribution, participation and equality encompass the right to a just compensation in those situations in which relocation of people seems to be the only way to avoid a tragedy. However, symmetry of treatment is essential: not only low-income residents can be accused of being responsible for threats to the environment.

It is also necessary to strongly relativise the usual 'common good' and 'public interest' arguments: can a (*supposedly*) general benefit arising from environmental protection legitimate the denying of basic human rights? A strictly utilitarian approach to ethics ('utility maximisation') can produce justification of an unjustifiable burden if seen in the context of structural inequalities and asymmetries. How can we be sure that the alleged benefit will be consistently distributed? And how can we be sure that the 'public interest' argument is being used in good faith? Very often we simply cannot (or worse: we have good reasons to suspect that the burden of 'environmental protection' is being carried in a socially very asymmetric way). A utilitarian approach tends to naivety in these circumstances.

3. Updating conservationism in an elitist way: 'gentrifying conservationism' in Rio de Janeiro

3.1. Introducing 'gentrifying conservationism'

The old opposition between 'preservationism' (emblematically represented by John

Muir) and ‘conservationism’ (whose great icon is traditionally Gifford Pinchot), deeply rooted in US-American political culture, cannot be used without caveats in other parts of the world, especially these days.

On the one hand, ‘preservationism’ has taken forms politically very conservative, in a way that lets John Muir’s romantic ideas appear as naïve. As early as the 1970s, Bosquet (1978) introduced the term ‘eco-fascism’ to designate a phenomenon that has been more or less concretely represented by many reactionary, ‘deep green’ activists in the last decades (US-American ‘deep ecology’ is an emblematic example of this; Murray Bookchin’s radical critique of ‘deep ecology’ contained in Bookchin et al. [1991] is very instructive in this regard).

On the other hand, ‘conservationism’ presents itself in several, partly very different forms. We can find, for instance, critical approaches such as Bookchin’s ‘social ecology’ (see, i.e. Bookchin 1992, 1995, 2004, 2005, 2007);⁴ and we can also find, of course, purely market-oriented approaches to environmental conservation (usually committed to a neo-liberal agenda, that is, without the social reformist flavour that was characteristic of Gifford Pinchot’s ideas). Among the socially conservative approaches to environmental conservation we can find an interesting type, exemplified by Rio de Janeiro’s case: I have termed it ‘gentrifying conservationism’.

The term ‘gentrification’ was introduced by Ruth Glass in the mid-1960s, but the concept has become fashionable only in recent decades as a result of the new ‘waves’ of ‘urban renewal’ *cum* displacement of poor people that we have witnessed in the context of the post-1980s (in some countries post-1990s) ‘neo-liberal city’. Although processes of ‘urban renewal’ *cum* displacement of poor people have occurred for generations in many cities, as both European and American (US-American *and* Latin American) examples testify, ‘gentrification’ as a concept tries to capture the new aspects of

contemporary globalised and neo-liberal capitalism. Different aspects of ‘gentrification’ have been systematically studied since the 1980s (see, i.e. Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2010), and several authors have discussed the socio-geographical range of this phenomenon (see, i.e. López-Morales 2015). One of the facets that we must pay attention to is the interplay between ‘gentrification’ and ‘environmental protection’.

A few other authors have also paid some attention to this interplay. Contributing to a debate proposed by the blog *The Nature of Cities* (TNOC 2014) around the question ‘What are the social justice implications of urban ecology, and how can we make sure that “green cities” are not synonymous with “gentrified” or “exclusive” cities?’, Rebecca Bratspies warned that ‘without strong public-minded government oversight, “green” development too often leads to exclusion and displacement’ (TNOC 2014). However, she and most other contributors seem to believe too much in the potentialities of state-led urban design and urban planning, overemphasising the relevance of tools such as inclusionary zoning. They fail to recognise both the ultimate framework of gentrification and displacement (the capitalist city, particularly the neo-liberal one) and the essential limits of state-led urban planning.

A strong link between gentrification and the designation of conservation areas has also been emphasised by authors as different as Ahlfeldt et al. (2013) and Sandberg et al. (2013). However, while the former do not see it from a critical point of view—they stress instead the importance of ‘cooperative behaviour’ and between homeowners on the basis of the information that most buyers acknowledge the benefits of the designation of their residential places as conservation areas due to an increase in property value—the latter explore what they understand as a ‘neoliberalisation of conservation’ (Sandberg et al. 2013, 238) through critical lenses. For them, the exurbanites they see found in the Greater Toronto area—more specifically in the place known as Oak

Ridges Moraine—'[...] leave the city in search of the "ideal countryside" based on an Anglo-American countryside idea, hoping to become more closely connected to nature' (110). What Sandberg et al. found there was '[...] an attempt by middle-class property interests to use the rhetoric of environmentalism to protect and further their own amenity and landscape consumption values' (20). While '[e]xurbia epitomizes an individualized, private, and exclusive living in an idealized nature' (20), the development industry, on its part,

'has [...] used the Oak Ridges Moraine brand to market housing developments. [...] This aesthetic is seen in the numerous subdivisions that are named after the very same ecosystems that they have replaced. [...] Ravine lots, creek lots, or lots next to woods are marketed as a premium. Housing developments are portrayed as green communities that constitute privileged opportunities to live in harmony with nature.' (223)

The word that seems to summarise the process—*gentrification*—is used only at the very end of the book (see Sandberg et al. 2013, 241), but the authors make it clear that they understand very well the elitist character of such a process in the course of which the area has become 'the exclusive preserve of the wealthy' (241). In fact, as they say, '[o]n the Oak Ridges Moraine, combined growth and nature conservation plans promote [...] an exclusive landscape defined by environmental values that accommodate residents of financial means [...]' (232–233). This is a clear example of what I have called 'gentrifying conservationism'. Interestingly, as this example shows, conservationism is under such circumstances more often than not very limited:

'[t]he current dominant policies in Ontario to preserve nature and promote growth share a common nature aesthetic that is essentially used to protect both development and nature, but in the end the system serves to maintain exclusive residential and industrial property

values while excluding other interests and compromising nature in inadvertent ways'. (233; emphasis added)

Capitalist interests can very much renew the strategies used to achieve capital accumulation, and this sort of 'conservationism' is one of them. As Sandberg et al. (2013) say, '[t]his is a story of the pervasiveness and mutability of the prevailing growth paradigm and the way it is not superseded but embedded in new ways of thinking about—and even selling—nature on the Moraine' (235). Within this framework, an interesting alliance emerges: '[w]e documented a sustained campaign that moved beyond place-based activism to form networked coalition of rural and urban interests, homeowners, and environmentalists who organized on a regional scale and drew upon a wider anti-sprawl and environmentalist network' (235).

As we will see in the next section, in Rio de Janeiro's case the pro-environment and at the same time not only pro-growth but also clearly anti-poor alliance has another composition and other characteristics but an essentially similar meaning. (Re)organising and (re)shaping urban space in order to adapt it to 'gentrifying conservationism' (actually to capital accumulation and elites' residential needs—all that in the name of environmental protection) can be articulated with the help of urban planning tools, but it is ultimately a matter of political strategy—in other words, of *urban geopolitics*, or more precisely of *urban eco-geopolitics*. That is why urban (eco-)geopolitics constitutes a broader context and a deeper layer than state-led urban planning in its ordinary sense.

3.2. The case of Rio de Janeiro

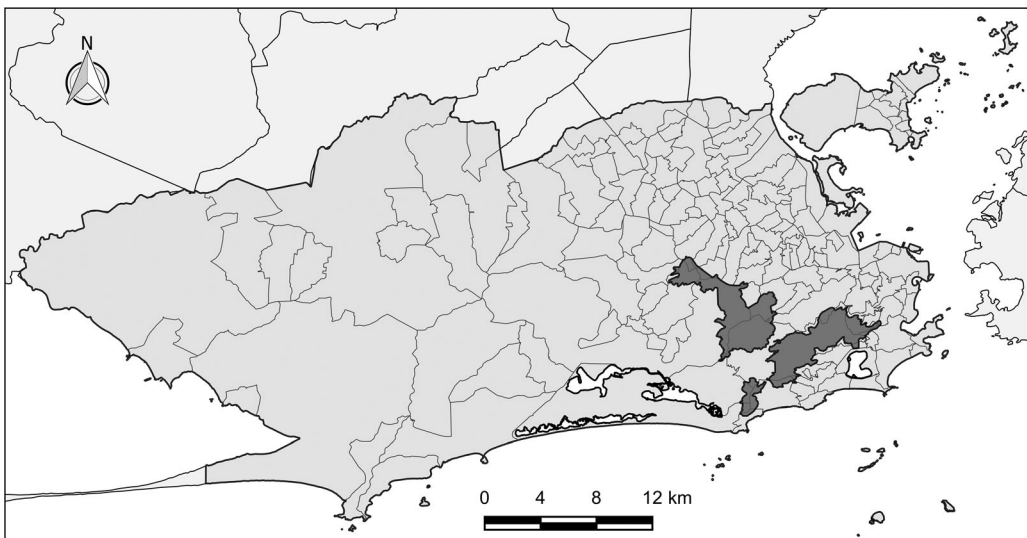
Let us now consider the concrete case of Rio de Janeiro.

Three *maciços* (mountain massifs) can be found in the city of Rio de Janeiro: Maciço da Tijuca, Maciço da Pedra Branca and Maciço do Gericinó (or Mendanha), the

latter located on the border between Rio de Janeiro and the city of Nova Iguaçu. The Tijuca massif, with its 118.7 square kilometres, is surpassed in size only by the Pedra Branca massif; moreover, it shows a greater socio-spatial complexity and contains a higher density of disputes concerning land use. Located between four large geographic sectors of the city (the 'zones' South, North and West as well as Barra da Tijuca), the slopes of the Tijuca massif mark the landscape of many neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro—from privileged areas of the South Zone to many *favelas*. Of enormous relevance is the fact that the Tijuca massif comprises a national park, the Tijuca National Park (established in 1961). With an area of 39.5 square kilometres, it is one of the smallest Brazilian national parks, but it also is the largest replanted urban forest in the world, and it is the most visited national park in the country. It is also (after the state parks Cantareira in São Paulo and Pedra

Branca in Rio de Janeiro), the largest urban forest conservation unit in Brazil. Constituted by four, partly discontinuous subareas or 'sectors' (*setores*) as can be seen in Figure 1—the forest is concentrated mainly in Sector A—the park is mostly located in districts that have traditionally been populated by the local middle class and even elites. However, there have also been poor, informal residential areas (*favelas*) just outside the park for generations; several of these *favelas* are actually much older than the park itself.

The mountain massif that comprises the Tijuca National Park also contains an Area of Environmental Protection and Urban Recovery (*Área de Proteção Ambiental e Recuperação Urbana*, APARU), the APARU of Alto da Boa Vista. The APARU of Alto da Boa Vista was created by means of a decree by Rio de Janeiro's city hall in 1992 but has not been implemented so far because further proceedings required for its



Tijuca National Park: its location in the city of Rio de Janeiro

— District boundary
 ■ Tijuca National Park

NUPED
 NÚCLEO DE PESQUISAS SOBRE
 DESENVOLVIMENTO SÓCIO-ESPACIAL

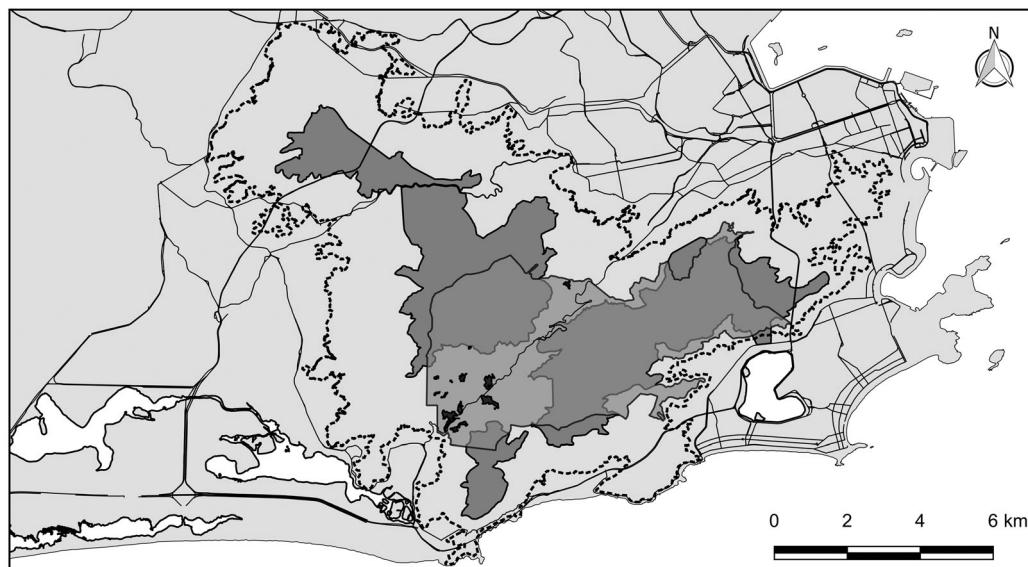
Source: Instituto Pereira Passos
 Designed by Marcelo Lopes de Souza
 and Matheus Barroso
 Drawn by Matheus Barroso

Figure 1 The *setores* of the Tijuca National Park, which together amount to little more than a third of the total Tijuca massif area.

ultimate lawfulness have not been met by the municipal parliament yet). The APARU largely corresponds to the 'buffer zone' (*zona de amortecimento*) of the park; that is the reason why human settlements are in principle legally tolerated there (see Figure 2, where the *favelas* located in the park's 'buffer zone' are also depicted). The land strip formed by that portion of the APARU that extends itself between Sectors A, B and C has been for decades the main scenario for numerous tensions and social struggles that have taken place at the Tijuca massif. It is so to speak a perfect 'laboratory' for watching the (geo)political instrumentalisation of the ecological discourse.

In the past decade, Rio de Janeiro's newspaper *O Globo* started a series of reports provocatively titled 'Illegal. So What?', which supposedly aimed at putting the local administration under pressure because of the many land-use irregularities found across the city.

Later, the series unfolded into a kind of permanent forum (or, as it says on the website, 'a channel offered by *O Globo* for you to report and seek solutions for what disrespects the laws and urbanistic standards of Rio de Janeiro') which looks for Twitter followers: @ILEGALeDAI. Indeed, the media has played a decisive role with regard to promoting an asymmetrical treatment of social classes by the state apparatus in Rio de Janeiro. Although the *Promotoria de Justiça de Tutela Coletiva do Meio Ambiente e do Patrimônio Cultural do Ministério Público do Rio de Janeiro* (public prosecutor's office for environmental and cultural heritage issues of the state of Rio de Janeiro) has been the main institutional agent of the current attempt to promote the total or partial removal of the *favelas* located in the Tijuca massif, it can be said that its role has not only been made public and highlighted but perhaps also stimulated by the



Rio de Janeiro: Tijuca Massif and its conservation units

- Major streets
- Tijuca Massif
- Favelas within the APARU
- APARU of Alto da Boa Vista
- Tijuca National Park

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Source: Instituto Pereira Passos
Designed by Marcelo Lopes de Souza
and Matheus Barroso
Drawn by Matheus Barroso

Figure 2 Tijuca massif with its two conservation units (Tijuca National Park and APARU of Alto da Boa Vista) and the *favelas* located within the limits of the park's 'buffer zone'.

mainstream, corporate media. The following news is highly representative:

‘The *Ministério Público* [public prosecutor’s office] is demanding from the mayor of Rio de Janeiro a response to the *ofício* that the Prosecutor’s Office for Collective Protection of Environment and Cultural Heritage sent to him, in which it draws attention to the need to remove families who illegally occupy areas within the Tijuca forest.

[...]

A survey conducted by the *Ministério Público* revealed that of 15 *favelas* that exist in the surroundings of the Tijuca National Park (Alto da Boa Vista district), only four did not increase in size over the past two years. The work was monitored by teams from the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro and the state and federal governments.

[...]

In a letter sent to the mayor, the *Ministério Público* pointed out that “it is necessary to remove the families, because there is an imminent risk of uniting the communities (*comunidades*), causing damage to the environment”.

If urgent measures are not taken, the forecast of the *Ministério Público* technical support team is that these 15 communities will be a single large *favela* in the next ten years.

The *Ministério Público* urgently calls for the total removal of the Vale Encantado, João Lagoa, Fazenda, Biquinha, Ricardinho and of a *vila* located at the number 866 of the Furnas street.

According to the report the *Ministério Público* delivered to the Justice, there is a risk of these communities coalesce similarly to what happened to Rocinha [Rio de Janeiro’s largest *favela*]. In addition to environmental degradation of the Atlantic forest [*Mata Atlântica*] area, there is a risk of landslides affecting residents. Springs, rivers and hillsides are also threatened by illegal occupation.

According to the prosecutor Rosani Cunha Gomes, urban growth in the Alto da Boa Vista district has been formally limited and the environment has been formally protected by means of an ordinance. A report of the Army’s Cartography Service quoted by the

Ministério Público points to a loss of 48% of forest cover in recent decades. According to IBGE data (year: 2000), the *favelas* of the Alto da Boa Vista district amount to 917 households with 3240 people.’

Let us now do a comparison of such statements and forecasts with some basic facts. Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) data (Census 2010) and even the data offered by the Pereira Passos Institute of Rio de Janeiro’s Municipality are clear: most of the eight *favelas* (Açude da Solidão, Biquinha, Complexo Agrícola, Fazenda, Mata Machado, [Estrada do] Soberbo, Tijuacu and Vale Encantado) showed a very small or even tiny population increase in 2010 (the only exceptions being Mata Machado and Tijuacu); moreover, the spatial growth of almost all of them ranged from nothing to very little over a period of a decade and a half (1999–2013), as demonstrated by monitoring based on satellite images carried out by Pereira Passos Institute (see Table 1).

Let us consider the eight *favelas* whose data are shown in Table 1 (Figure 3 shows their location as well as that of two others): two of them simply did not grow in terms of area (Soberbo and Vale Encantado), and another one (Complexo Agrícola) even presented a slight negative growth (although the ‘shrinking’ of 0.34% may be due to some small error of diagnosis); two others (Açude da Solidão and Mata Machado) showed an insignificant growth of less than 3%; and the remaining three *favelas* (Biquinha, Fazenda and Tijuacu) showed a relatively significant but by no means very relevant growth (10.47%, 8.74% and 7.72%, respectively). These data therefore suggest that the idea that the *favelas* of the Alto da Boa Vista district are expanding rapidly and tend to form a complex of *favelas*, a single spot comparable to Rocinha (one of the largest *favelas* in Brazil and the largest one in Rio de Janeiro, whose population has been estimated at 200,000 inhabitants), amounts to a little balanced and non-realistic judgement; in fact, it is a rather distorted assessment of reality. After 10 years since this forecast was

Table 1 Population, number of households and area of eight favelas in the Tijuca massif

	Population 2010	Households 2010	Area ^a 1999	Area ^a 2004	Area ^a 2008	Area ^a 2009	Area ^a 2010	Area ^a 2011	Area ^a 2012	Area ^a 2013
Acúde da Solidão	60	20	3175	3245	3245	3245	3245	3245	3245	3245
Biquinha	240	68	20,747	21,852	22,876	23,085	23,172	23,172	23,172	23,172
Complexo Agrícola	505	159	59,483	59,283	59,283	59,284	59,284	59,284	59,284	59,284
Fazenda	444	154	31,620	33,092	34,206	34,206	34,206	34,206	34,206	34,645
Mata Machado	2248	680	67,439	69,195	69,443	69,443	69,443	69,443	69,443	69,443
Soberbo	29	13	5886	5886	5886	5886	5886	5886	5886	5886
Tijuacu	1156	359	52,362	54,912	55,168	56,742	56,742	56,742	56,742	56,742
Vale Encantado	45	12	6307	6307	6307	6307	6307	6307	6307	6307

^aSquare metres.

Source: Instituto Pereira Passos (Diretoria de Informações da Cidade [DIC], Sistema de Assentamentos de Baixa Renda [SABRENI]).

proclaimed, it is far from being a reality. Why so much alarmism? *Cui bono*?

This kind of exaggeration on the part of the *Ministério Público*—reverberated with undisguised sensationalist tone by the local press—went so far as to putting the public prosecutors on a traumatic collision course with mayor Cesar Maia, who has been legally prosecuted due to an alleged improper administrative behaviour (*improbidade administrativa*) as he—according to the *Ministério Público*—did nothing to prevent the expansion of the *favelas*. Curiously enough, Cesar Maia’s administration was far from being an instance of politically progressive or socially sensitive local government (as is also the case with the current mayor, Eduardo Paes):

“The support staff responsible for environmental issues of the *Ministério Público* filed yesterday with a lawsuit demanding from the City Hall the containment of the uncontrolled growth [*crescimento desordenado*] and the demolition of the houses built in risk areas of 13 favelas of the Alto da Boa Vista district. In the lawsuit, the attorneys accuse the mayor Cesar Maia of omission because these communities are located in the Área de Preservação Ambiental e de Recuperação Urbana (APARU) of the Alto da Boa Vista district, which was created and had the area demarcated by a municipal decree (Decree 1,301/92).

In the lawsuit, the *Ministério Público* demands that seven *favelas* are entirely removed; the residents must be resettled; and the areas must be forested again, within one year. The *favelas* that will be affected are the following ones: Vale Encantado, João Lagoa, Açude, Estrada de Furnas, Fazenda, Biquinha and Ricardinho.”

The stridency of the *Ministério Público* in its critique of then-mayor Cesar Maia should not make us forget that in 2003 the same mayor had sent to the City Council a proposal for a *regulamentação* of the Alto da Boa Vista APARU (Câmara Municipal do Rio de Janeiro 2015) that clearly implies the removal of the *favelas* and indirectly reserves the Alto da Boa Vista district for the middle class and

Tijuca Massif: favelas of the APARU of Alto da Boa Vista

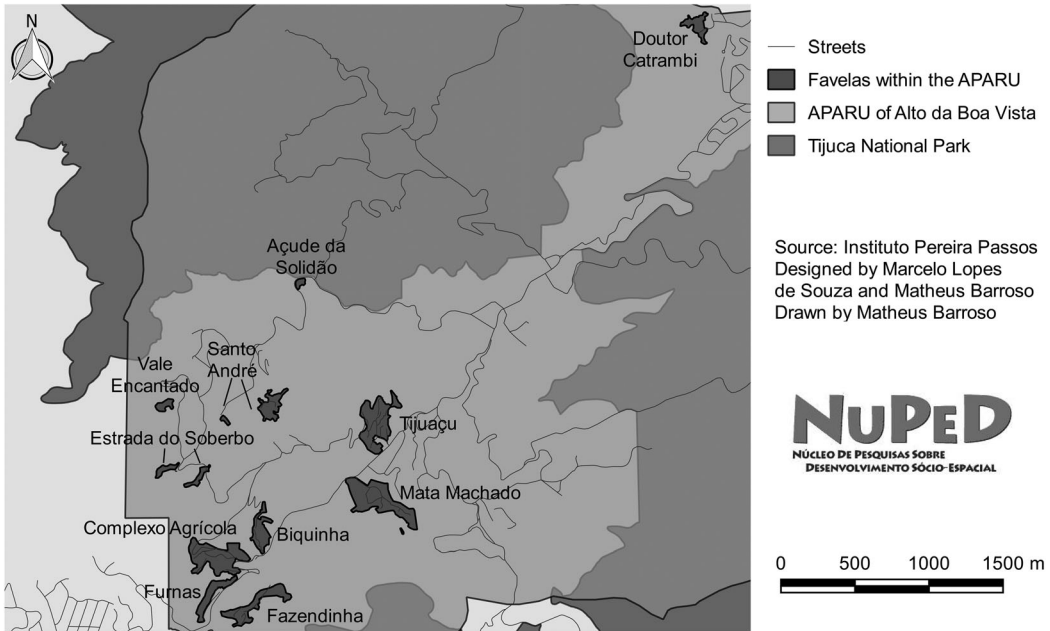


Figure 3 A more detailed view of that part of the ‘buffer zone’ of the Tijuca National Park where the *favelas* of APARU of Alto da Boa Vista are concentrated allows us to identify and name them, also making easier the task of better assessing their relative sizes. Compare this to the data in Table 1.

the elite—the only ones who are able to bear the costs implied by the urbanistic parameters set forth therein. Here we see, thus, more evidence—this time provided by the municipal administration itself—of an asymmetric treatment of the social groups that inhabit the immediate surroundings of the Tijuca forest. Notice also that in the master plan approved in 2011 for the city of Rio de Janeiro (and actually already in the ‘macro-zoning’ of 2007) the middle-class and elite districts of the South Zone, the central business district (CBD) and the Alto da Boa Vista district appear together as an area to be ‘controlled’ (*controlada*) (Prefeitura do Rio de Janeiro 2015). This kind of ‘control’—a term that clearly belongs to a geopolitical vocabulary—has, as we can see, a primary target: the poor.

Let us turn our attention to the *Ministério Público* again. The following passage, taken from a paper that mentions two other press reports, is also truly illustrative of the

Ministério Público’s approach to the whole problem:

‘The *Ministério Público Estadual*, through the Prosecutor for the Environment and Cultural Heritage, plead for the opening of an *inquérito civil* to investigate the responsibility of the City Hall for the expansion of five *favelas*, all located in the South Zone, the highest-value area of the city in terms of land value—Rocinha, Vila Alice, Babilônia, Chácara do Céu and Julio Otoni. The prosecutor urges the immediate demolition of empty houses—as the demolition of the occupied ones require judicial authorisation—by virtue of their informality; in so doing, however, the prosecutor completely neglects the prohibition of removal imposed by both the *Lei Orgânica Municipal* and the master plan.

[...]

A controversy around the disposition of the *Lei Orgânica Municipal* that determines environmental risk as the only possibility of

removal was opened as precisely those arguments have been used by mayor Cesar Maia to free the City Hall from liability to monitor construction in *favelas*. The *Ministério Público Estadual* ruled contrary to the interpretation of Cesar [Maia], saying that the inspection of irregular buildings by the City Hall is a legal duty, and that the non-compliance characterised omission and improper conduct [*improbidade administrativa*]. The *Ministério Público* suggests changing the municipal legislation, but stresses that the *Código Florestal* [Forestry Code] is a federal law and therefore of higher hierarchical order, which establishes the protection of *áreas de proteção permanente* [conservation units] as a government's obligation.

The *Ministério Público* also ordered the City Hall to submit within 20 days a removal plan for 14 *favelas*, to be executed within one year, and the resettlement of families living in about 4000 houses which will be affected.

According to the *promotores de meio ambiente* [public prosecutors for environmental issues] who forwarded the recommendation, there would be no legal impediment in the action proposed for these *favelas* are located in *áreas de proteção permanente* or in environmental risk areas. [...]

Eight of the 14 communities affected by the determination of the *Ministério Público Estadual* were located in the Alto da Boa Vista district—in the surroundings of the Tijuca National Park—, four in the Jacarepaguá district, and two in the South Zone of the city. As the City Hall refused to accept the recommendation of the *Ministério Público*, the *Promotoria do Meio Ambiente* came a year later with a *ação civil pública* to force it to restrain the growth of 13 *favelas* located in Alto da Boa Vista, requesting the full removal of seven of them and the demolition of houses that would be at risk areas in the remaining six. The *Ministério Público* also demands that the mayor is prosecuted for administrative misconduct and is suspended from his political rights for a period of up to six years.' (Compans 2007, 89–90)

The claim according to which the *Código Florestal* is a superior law is as such not

wrong, but Rio de Janeiro's *Ministério Público* seems to forget that the *Código Florestal* and the law that established the National Protected Areas System (SNUC) are not the only federal laws that regulate matters of interest on the issue. The legal and institutional context also includes the City Statute (Law 10.257/2001). However limited, flawed and even partly contradictory the City Statute can be, it is quite astonishing that, while in some other states the *promotores* seek to find a kind of balance between the right to housing (even if this right is severely restricted by the limits imposed by the framework of a formalist legalistic view tied to the legitimacy of the capitalist status quo, as both the City Statute and the Federal Constitution itself obviously do not challenge fundamental aspects such as private ownership of land, for example) and the need for 'environmental protection', in the state of Rio de Janeiro the *Ministério Público* seems to have made a clear preferential option for 'environmental protection' (grounded on legal texts as above all the SNUC and the *Código Florestal*) at the expense of the poor and against their right to housing. The legal security of tenure and land regularisation have relied on some support, for example, of the Institute of Land and Cartography of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ITERJ), while the *Promotoria de Justiça de Tutela Coletiva do Meio Ambiente e do Patrimônio Cultural* unleashed—formally against the Municipality itself, which had assumed a too ambiguous position in its view—a crusade against the *favelas* of the Alto da Boa Vista district (which comprises most of the Tijuca National Park and its 'buffer zone', the latter being partly included in the APARU of Alto da Boa Vista).

While the *Ministério Público* continues its crusade, residential occupation by the middle class is left undisturbed, even in those situations where it occurs close to a *favela* targeted for removal, as it is the case with tiny Vale Encantado (see Figure 4). It seems that the occupation of the same environment by the middle class is far from being regarded

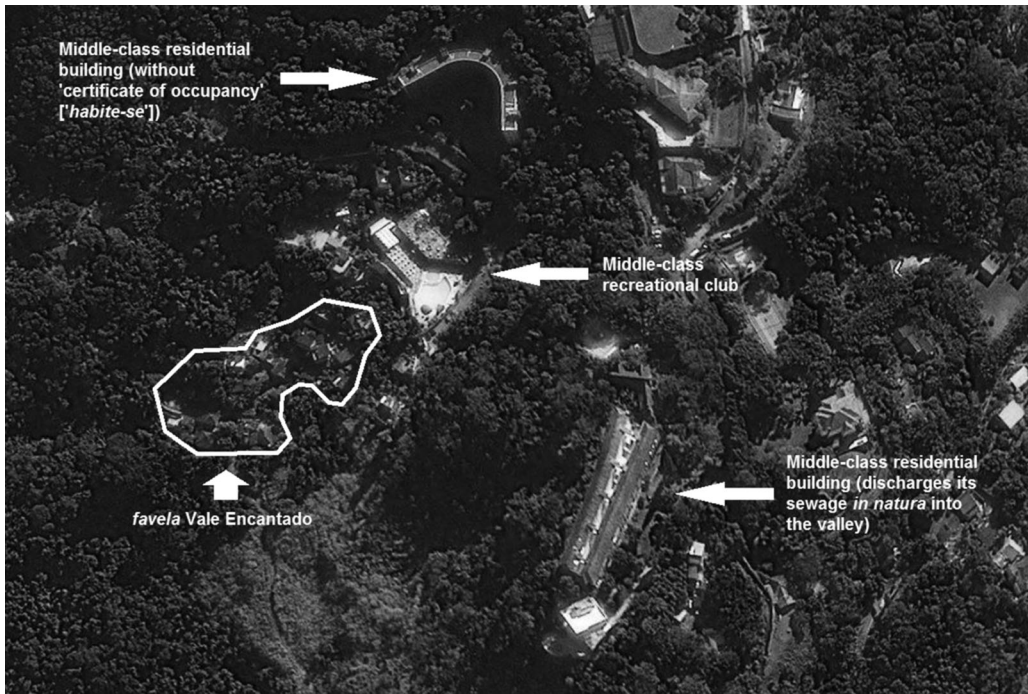


Figure 4 Vale Encantado in 2013 (perimeter marked white). In the upper right corner, immediately adjacent to the *favela*, we can see a middle-class club. We can also see the two middle-class residential *condomínios*, one of which is located in front of the club across the street and the other one similarly close to the club (Source of the orthophoto: Instituto Pereira Passos; information added).

by the state apparatus as an environmental threat. In fact, the Municipality has made it clear on more than one occasion how desirable it would be to re-attract financially well-endowed citizens to the Alto da Boa Vista district (which, from 1980 on, became increasingly unattractive as a residential option for the middle class due to another type of risk: the increasingly threatening presence of retail drug traffickers territorialising the *favelas* of Tijuca district, gateway to the Alto da Boa Vista district for those who come from Rio's North Zone). It is symptomatic that in the entry 'Alto da Boa Vista (Rio de Janeiro)' of Wikipedia, the following information and opinions can be found:

'from the 1980s and 1990s on, the district has experienced a sharp decline, being deserted especially by its wealthier inhabitants (it is possible to verify the existence of several empty mansions, available for sale or sometimes transformed into spaces for large

parties and events), as well as high level of real estate depreciation, attributed mainly to the (still small) process of formation of *favelas* on the slopes, thus leading the local authorities to begin to revisit the current terms of land use'.

Shortly thereafter, one can read the following information in the same Wikipedia entry:

'it is rumoured [*consta*] that projects aiming at the eviction [of the *favelas*] from the slopes have already begun, especially due to the necessary preservation of local nature. However, a new planning legislation is still needed for the purposes of the district becoming able to attract new investments and real estate projects again, which might contain the illegal occupation process of their conservation areas.'

This is a mirror of how the Municipality and the *Ministério Público*—but also the mass media and of course the wealthy locals—have seen the issue.

Is it—let us ask en passant—strictly necessary to dislodge the population of *favelas* located in the ‘buffer zone’ of the Tijuca National Park and in the APARU more specifically, at least as far as the ‘risk areas’ argument (in the sense of spaces that ‘present a risk’) is concerned? The following fact should make us reflect. As reported by the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* on 15 May 2015 (*Cotidiano* section, page B1) between 2007 and 2015, only 15% of R\$2.3 billion provided by the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) to cope with landslides and mudslides (the main type of risk associated with areas that allegedly present some ‘environmental risk’) were effectively used by states and municipalities. It is not very difficult to estimate the amount of infrastructure related to *favela* upgrading and slope stabilisation that could have been built with the unused 85%.

4. Concluding remarks: de te fabula narratur

As the discussions briefly mentioned in Section 3.1 show, the interplay between gentrification and environmental protection has already been observed by authors based in different countries. At a more general level, we should keep in mind the old Latin phrase ‘de te fabula narratur’ (= ‘the story applies to you’) when talking about urban eco-geopolitics or more specifically about ‘gentrifying conservationism’. As paradigmatic as Rio de Janeiro’s case can be, it is only one among many possible illustrations. As we saw in Section 3.1, ‘gentrifying conservationism’ can be found in several (or many) places across the world.

Sandberg et al. (2013, 239) point out that:

‘[i]n the effort to remain competitive, cities and regions often resort to the creation of the spectacular, or of spectacle, such as the building of museums, sport stadiums, and waterfronts, to attract investments, cultural events, and tourists [...]. Those who promote the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Greenbelt similarly strive to frame these land

areas as recognizable spectacles that charm and brand the Toronto region.’

The creation of the spectacular (or of spectacle) has been famously represented in contemporary Rio de Janeiro by the infrastructure built (not seldom after the displacement of poor people) to enhance and support sporting mega-events such as the Olympic Games and ‘urban renewal’ projects like ‘Porto Maravilha’ in the harbour area (see on this Souza 2012b). However, as we saw, Rio de Janeiro also counts as an instance of a city where ‘nature’ is very often used in a discourse that both promotes city marketing and potentially supports social injustice.

The case Sandberg and his colleagues examined in Canada is obviously much less dramatic than Rio de Janeiro’s case. Furthermore, if even in a ‘semi-peripheral’ country such as Brazil (whose political culture and institutions are still contaminated by the legacy of many years of military dictatorship [1964–85]) the eco-geopolitical governmentalisation of ‘nature’ does still not show any strong link with the ‘hard’ side of urban geopolitics—namely, the systematic use of the police and even the deployment of military forces to enforce socio-spatial control, something that would make a term such as ‘eco-fascism’ perfect to describe reality—that should be in ‘core countries’ a much less imminent scenario. ‘Gentrifying conservationism’ has presented itself in a ‘mild’ form so far, and therefore it is certainly not a particularly dramatic example of what urban eco-geopolitics can be. *But who could seriously say that that will never be the case? Or even that that is not plausible that ‘eco-fascism’ can become part of the socio-political landscape both in the ‘Global South’ and in the ‘Global North’?* Right now, this must be ‘only’ a hypothesis rather than a forecast. But it is advisable to avoid any absolute scepticism regarding a phenomenon that has fragmentarily announced itself before our eyes for a long time.

In his *magnum opus* *L’Homme et la Terre*, anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus expressed his opinion about Ebenezer Howard’s

urbanistic model of the 'garden cities'. According to him, the 'garden cities' had a kind of elitist bias implied by the valuation of nature and countryside (real or imagined) qualities amidst an unequal society. His analysis contains some fine grains of irony, even if he was not properly unsympathetic to Howard's project: '[...] however, those who live in the garden cities are always the privileged ones, and good intentions on the part of philanthropists have not sufficed to stave off the consequences of the antagonism between Capital and Labour'⁵ (Reclus 1905–1908, vol. 5, 371).

In order to avoid any naivety regarding the role of standard 'ecology' discourse and in order to prevent that 'environmental protection' being used as a tool to reinforce segregation and ultimately in benefit of capital accumulation—and detrimental to the most basic rights of the poor—the lesson extracted by Reclus should not be forgotten. The kind of elitism he saw in Ebenezer Howard's reformist model is nothing in comparison with even some of the 'mild' forms of urban eco-geopolitics we can find nowadays, for instance, in Rio de Janeiro (not to mention possible, very explicit and brutal forms of 'eco-fascism'). But he pointed at the core of the problem: from a humanistic perspective, 'nature' (or what we often associate with this word in terms of beauty, healthy environment and so on) must not be socially exclusive, and 'environmental protection' must not be socially exclusionary.

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Notes

- 1 French original: 'il s'agit de rapports entre des forces politiques précisément localisées, qu'elles soient officielles ou clandestines: lutes sanglantes entre groupes ethniques ou factions religieuses, guerres entre nations, lutte d'un peuple pour son indépendance, menaces de conflits entre grands États'.
- 2 French original: '[...] des rivalités de pouvoirs sur un territoire, qu'il soit de grandes ou de petites dimensions, y compris au sein des agglomérations urbaines'.
- 3 At a more general level, an increasingly 'hard' side of urban eco-geopolitics has existed for many years, although its global importance is still underestimated. Let us keep in mind, for example, the 'Water War' in Bolivia in 2000 (also known as the 'Cochabamba Water War') as an example.
- 4 A forerunner of which was E. Reclus's critical and dialectical approach to environmental problems (see, i.e. Reclus 1864, 1868–69, 1905–1908).
- 5 French original: '[...] mais ce son toujours des privilégiés qui habitent les villes-jardins et le bon vouloir des philanthropes n'est pas suffisant à conjurer les conséquences de l'antagonisme qui existe entre le Capital et le Travail'.

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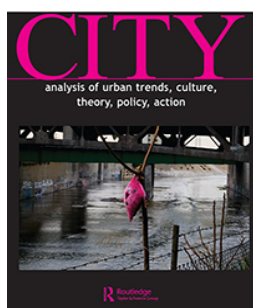
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Unprecedented natures?

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Unprecedented natures?

An anatomy of the Chennai floods

Pushpa Arabindoo

Between November and December 2015, the southern Indian city of Chennai (alongside the northern coastal regions in the state of Tamil Nadu) experienced torrential rains with unanticipated flood consequences. Notoriously known as India's 'water scarcity capital', instead of the proverbial 'poor monsoons', a series of low-pressure depressions with 'record-breaking' rainfall submerged the city rapidly, as homes and apartments flooded, communications were cut and transportation came to a standstill, including the closure of the airport. Even as environmental activists took the state and its allied actors (in the development and planning sector) to task over what they considered was a deliberate and reckless 'urbanisation of disaster', the state sought refuge in the argument that this was an unprecedented (global) weather anomaly. Recognising the need for a more robust (post-) disaster discussion, this paper offers an anatomy of the floods that begs a broader rethink of 21st-century urban disasters and argues that the current discourse offered by the social science of disaster is insufficient in unravelling the complex spatial and environmental histories behind disasters. It goes beyond setting up a mere critique of capitalist urbanisation to offer a cogent debunking of the deeply engrained assumptions about the unprecedented nature of disasters. It does so by dismantling three commonly invoked arguments that transgress any kind of environmental common sense: (1) the 100-year flood fallacy; (2) the ensuing debates around environmental knowledge and subjectivities; and (3) the need to spatially rescale (and regionalise) the rationale of the 'urbanisation of disaster'. It concludes by raising concerns over the persistence of a resilience discourse, one that relies on the will of the 'expert' underwriting not only a non-specific techno-scientific approach but also perpetuates a politicisation of risk that shows little promise of accommodating new epistemologies that are socio-ecologically progressive.

Key words: floods, unprecedented, environmental knowledge and subjectivities, urbanisation of disaster, risk and resilience, Chennai

'There is no such thing as a natural disaster.'
(Neil Smith 2006)

'Chennai is a natural disaster of unprecedented scale.' (Prakash Javadekar 2015, Minister of State [Independent Charge] for Environment, Forests and Climate Change, 26 May 2014–5 July 2016)

For a city tagged indubitably as India's 'water scarcity capital' (Potter 2015, 112), Chennai's water woes took a surprising turn towards the end of 2015 when torrential rains pelted the city with unanticipated flood consequences. Only a month earlier, amidst nervous anticipation of the North-east monsoon (or what is

known popularly as the winter monsoon), newspapers were bemoaning a dismal South-west or summer monsoon, by the end of which all sources of water supply had been sucked dry, and politicians and policymakers were running out of their repertoire of tricks to avoid a drought-ridden disaster. While the initial onset of rains brought some comfort to an anxious city, it soon became obvious that this was not going to be yet another year of average or less than normal rainfall. Instead, through a series of low-pressure depressions in the Bay of Bengal triggered by what weather experts referred to as a 'super-charged monsoon', Chennai (and the northern coastal regions in the state of Tamil Nadu) experienced heavy downpours resulting in 'record-breaking' rainfall for the months of November and December. As the city submerged rapidly, homes and apartments were flooded, communications were cut and transportation came to a standstill, including the closure of the airport for several days. With lives lost, extensive property damage and businesses affected, Chennai was declared officially a disaster.

Almost immediately, Katrina-esque images of a 'city under water' circulated widely over the Internet and international media relayed reports on this deadly disaster. Even the UK broadsheet *The Guardian* set aside its frequent preoccupation with Mumbai as India's metonymic megacity to cover this critical situation. As a city that rarely makes it on the international radar of news reporting, after the devastating 2004 tsunami, Chennai found its natural misery being written once again into a global story. Somewhat reassuring during this dark hour was the spate of citizen reporting where residents provided eyewitness accounts of the unfolding events in terms of not only a sense of shock over losses incurred but also with empathy about how they were recouped through the voluntary heroics of local civilians. Since the Mumbai floods of 2005, such framings have become a standard where, as

Anjaria (2006) observed, public imagination is captured by incredible acts of selflessness and outpourings of generosity, with people setting aside their socio-economic prejudices to help one another and ensure that the city doesn't descend into outright chaos. Often relayed through popular coverage by traditional and, more recently, social media, they claim not only a realistic representation of the lived experience of disaster but their optimistic ethos is also a much-needed morale booster at a moment of despair.¹ While these stories may not shy away from asking difficult questions such as the need to untangle long-standing socio-political factors that contributed to the disaster, such queries are implicit as their preoccupation is to lessen the sense of threat for those caught in the milieu of the aftermath, unwittingly making the event seem more personal and constrained. It would be too much to expect these free-floating narratives to assemble the parts and pieces of this particular event together into a broader (post-) disaster appraisal. More importantly, in a context where those affected are eager to know 'why this has happened (to us)', individual, first-hand, folkloric accounts provide little challenge to the explanations offered by a state quick to acquit itself.

Thus, while the Chief Minister Jayalithaa's initial reaction that 'losses are unavoidable when there's very heavy rain' suggests a commonly entrenched fatalism about the monsoons and its regular trail of death and destruction, her subsequent depiction of the event as the 'rarest of the rare' is more in line with the official position projecting the floods as unprecedented. This is not dissimilar to Davis' (1995) dialectic of ordinary disaster where, by berating the weather for its perversity, the state covers its lapse in foreseeing the catastrophe or mitigating its effect, presenting them instead as historically specific episodes embedded within a specious claim of exceptionalism. While there is a planetary appeal to Davis' argument, there is an imperative to postcolonialise it as otherwise we risk obscuring specific socio-political

causes that trigger what is increasingly broad-brushed as a global weather anomaly, and ignoring (neo)colonial practices producing specific forms of vulnerability. It is in this effort that this paper begins by taking issue with the emphasis on the 'unprecedented', as it favours an environmental determinism that undermines a critical disaster discourse. As Paul Brass (1986) showed through his analysis of the Bihar Famine of 1966–67, the notion of the unprecedented is a political invention that has no standing in the definitions of social science. It masks the fact that the crisis situation is generally less of a deviation from the normal, often falling in place within a classic sequence of recurring flood and drought. At the same time, there needs to be some sensitivity in challenging this perception as we try and explain this scepticism to those affected, whose personal sense of calamity is unforeseen.

Additionally, in the case of Chennai, against accusations by environmental activists that urban development practices and their lack of respectful mutuality in the human–environment interaction were to blame for the disaster, both the regional and the national state were keen on retelling the disaster as a global weather anomaly. Thus, in light of the COP21 meeting held in Paris a few days after the catastrophic December floods, Prime Minister Narendra Modi blamed climate change for the 'unseasonal rains'. Indian media and environmental agencies picked up observations from the American space agency NASA and UNESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) that the record precipitation was unusual, amplified by record-warm seas and the long-distance effects of El Niño. There were even suggestions that the tropical depression that brought heavy rains to the city was the remnant of Typhoon Marilyn, or In-fa which had formed near the Philippines, cutting a wide berth across not just Chennai, but India's east coast and even northern parts of Sri Lanka. Thus, deliberate efforts were made to assimilate the floods

into a continuum of calamities cascading across the world with a supposedly planetary connection.²

Such interpretations are steeped in a liberal discourse of political denial, where the argument of weather disturbance and upheaval is invoked by the state not just to dispel citizen anxieties but, as shown by the media studies scholar Sturken (2001) in her impressive analysis of the 1997–98 El Niño, this is also a form of narrative that precludes political analysis or action. Through rhetorical manoeuvres, a state rubric is developed around the supposed authority of science to disable more discerning discussions of disaster. Civil society groups in the city are well aware of this tactic, one that hardly advances our scientific understanding of local environmental hazards. Frustrated with a state that wilfully ignores their ecological standpoint that disasters are compounded by the unsustainable dynamics of contemporary urbanisation, activists, over the past few months, have taken to public platforms, demanding accountability for what is essentially a state-propelled urbanisation of disaster.³ And yet, the state continues to snub them, focusing instead on populist measures such as cash and material compensation. This is tied to the patronage politics as fine-tuned to differing degrees by the two Dravidian regional parties who have been in power in Tamil Nadu since 1967 (DMK and ADMK), and who use significant moments such as the floods to offer material appeals (Wyatt 2013). In a crucial election year (May 2016), the Tamil Nadu State Government is only too aware of the challenge that severe weather events pose to incumbent politicians, as a result of which official post-disaster steps are dictated by electoral interests.⁴

Writing in the aftermath of Katrina, Neil Smith (2006) stressed the importance of putting social science to work as a counter-weight against official attempts dismissing Katrina as an inevitable 'natural' disaster. For, it is thanks to the persistence of critical social theorists that we now have the

uncontested axiom in disaster studies: ‘there is no such thing as a natural disaster’.⁵ While a wide-ranging literature comprising ‘the social science of disaster’ has contributed to a better understanding of how individuals and institutions respond under catastrophic circumstances, they have unwittingly set off a new sense of unease. Mostly, this has to do with their overwhelming reliance on lexicons such as risk, resilience, vulnerability and mitigation, constructs that have been co-opted by policymakers for their own gain, and matter less to those affected. It is also that there is something to the ‘nature’ of 21st-century urban disasters that begs a rethink, one that draws from not a fixed position but a series of positionings where, simply tagging disasters as social is not enough, insufficient as it is to unravel the complex spatial and environmental histories behind disasters. It is in pursuit of a better theoretical framework for such a task that Gotham and Greenberg (2014) suggest forging a link between the currently separate scholarship of disaster studies and urban studies, two fields that rarely converse with each other. Their reasoning is not only to connect disaster events to the broader contexts of urbanisation and social change, but to address specifically how social forces that produce systemic risk and vulnerability are themselves embedded within a longer genealogy of capitalist urbanisation. In challenging the discursive rationale of an unprecedented weather anomaly as presented in the aftermath of the Chennai floods, this paper follows their suggestion, undertaking a more cogent debunking of the deeply engrained prejudices about disasters, identifying especially the contradictions nested within their reference to a landscape of risk and resilience. In particular, the focus is to demystify and dismantle three commonly invoked arguments that sought to transgress attempts at any kind of environmental common sense: (1) the 100-year flood fallacy; (2) the ensuing debates around environmental knowledge and subjectivities; and (3) the need to spatially rescale (and

regionalise) our understanding of ‘urbanisation of disaster’.

The 100-year flood fallacy

In the days immediately following the November and December rains, there was a burst of interest in all things related to meteorology, as it became for some key actors (i.e. politicians, policymakers and the media) *the* scapegoat lens for explaining the crisis. For instance, satellite-map-based animations by the US space agency NASA highlighting the unprecedented nature of the rainfall were circulated eagerly in an attempt to naturalise the ‘extreme weather event’ narrative. NASA’s effective imagery showed an unusually high intensity of rainfall from 28 November to 4 December, with a special emphasis that ‘Chennai, between 1 and 2 December received more rainfall in 24 hours than it had seen on any day since 1901’ (‘Historic Rainfall Floods Southeast India,’ 2015). This was picked up by the local media as alert flash headlines: ‘Chennai weather forecast by NASA: Chennai rain broke 100 year old record, says US space agency’ (*The Financial Express* 2015). Amidst an on-ground struggle to make sense of the deluge and its aftermath, the 100-year flood rationale emerged as a master narrative whose apocalyptic recital provided, if not an explanation, at least some kind of framing to an event that was supposedly uncontrollable, arbitrary and chaotic. Over the next few months as it was bandied about in policy, media and public discussions with no questions about its scientific rigour, it conveniently served as a smokescreen to avoid the more uncomfortable task of unravelling the complex anatomy of the disaster.

The 100-year flood is a rough schematic that emerged in the 1970s as Western governments tried to calibrate flood frequency in a statistical manner compatible with the rise of the flood insurance industry. Its relativism notwithstanding (supposedly to allow a level

comparison of areas of risk), its reckless public invocation has resulted in it becoming a highly compromised and misunderstood factual piece of information. While even Wikipedia will tell you that the term '100-year flood' does not refer to a flood that occurs once every 100 years, this is precisely what a layperson assumes with none bothering to rectify this misreading. Given their immediate experience with the devastation caused by the floods, the public is comforted by the 100-year flood argument as they set the possibility of the disaster happening again at a safe temporal distance, 100 years into the remote future. It is this blending of science with sentiment that fails to clarify its real meaning: what it indicates is a 1% chance of flooding in any given year. As Pielke (1999) explained, in terms of cumulative probability there is a greater than 26% chance that we will see at least one 100-year flood over a period of 30 years (and, similarly, more than a 74% chance over 100 years). There is as well the fundamental question over its credibility as an explanatory science. In what is essentially seen as a 'statistical abstraction' (Davis 1995, 230) manipulating an idealised parameter (ignoring the diversity and complexity of floods as a real phenomenon and forcing a selective extraction of data or facts), Baker (1994, 145) dismisses the 100-year flood as a doubly fallacious term:

'These words, of course, have essentially nothing to do with real years or with real floods. Instead, the words represent an idealization based on (often fallacious) assumptions. They are an example, not of science, but of an insidious form of philosophical nominalism ... it is a particularly weak form of reasoning, induction, which generalizes from specific cases.'

As an applied science, its serviceable logic is questionable as it is based on past flood records and is thus subject to considerable errors when it comes to forecasting the exigencies of nature. The greater risk is the

consequence of planning decisions that incorporate the 100-year flood framing into policies, with assumptions based on a static model of nature. Failing to recognise that the 100-year flood is, in reality, dynamic and needs to be redefined with every new flood event leads to dead-on-arrival regulatory standards that barely withstand the next sequence of floods and needs to be constantly revised. This is precisely why Davis (1995) passionately argues that the 100-year flood is based not only on a fictional ecological history, but also on mechanistic periodicities which do not accommodate the complexity of a natural drainage pattern that is evolving and shifting with every successive flood.

There is a bigger problem with the 100-year flood mode of historical referencing which is that it uses rainfall data to emphasise the 'record' more than anything else. Compounded as we are by the brevity of our hydrological documentation, there is hardly any supporting information to be gleaned from precipitation registers which simply reveal the amount of rainfall received in a given day, month or year. Prone to numerical sensationalism, we allow a discourse at the lowest common denominator to flourish. What does the Meteorological department seek to convey when it reels out its numbers: 'Chennai had 246.5 mm rainfall in the last 24 hours which breaks the record of November 2005 which saw 142.4 mm ... the highest rainfall during the north-east monsoon was in November 1976, when the city recorded a rainfall of 452.4 mm' (*The Indian Express* 2015). While such foreboding declarations are meant to exaggerate the paranoia of a big weather story, it is drawn from a sketchy analytical terrain precluding a more sophisticated understanding of the event. Disadvantaged as we are by this blunt empiricism, Davis (1995) rails against the imaginary norms and averages that are constantly invoked as standards. Merely an abstraction, nothing is less likely to occur than average rainfall. As he astutely points out, the chance of the annual precipitation hitting the average mark is probably only a few

times in the history of measured rainfall. The actual norm is an oscillation between dry and humid periods. Sometimes, the annual average is delivered during the course of a month and a couple of storms. At other times, it may take two or even three drought years to achieve the same total.

If we are to persist with a statistical investigation of weather as an omnipresent discursive trope, the big question is why we fail to draw a meaningful pattern from the de facto numbers, treating each instance exceeding the 'average' as unique. This is partially because even though we have a precipitation log since the beginning of the 20th century, our historical knowledge of floods relies on a less scientific form of repository involving archives and oral histories. Anecdotal recollections from a few sources mention episodes of flooding in 1903, 1918, 1943, 1969, 1976, 1985, 1996, 1998 and 2005. There are specific accounts in addition about concentrated flooding in parts of Chennai in 2002, 2004 and 2010. Figure 1 provides Chennai's precipitation summary since 1901 (the years with acknowledged flooding area highlighted in dark grey while the ones in light grey show comparable rainfall but no record of floods). Bearing in mind that while excessive rainfall often leads to flooding, it is not something that is immanent in nature. Looking at the numbers forces a few 'thinking out loud' questions: (1) 1903 was one of the earliest recorded flood events in the city's history when it received nearly 2000 mm of annual rainfall, with an unusually high amount in December (466.35 mm was the highest till 2015 surpassed this figure with 539 mm). Even though we have little information about the geography of flooding in these two different epochs and there are several unaccounted for variables, purely on a numerical basis, one cannot help question a century's worth of modernisation and development if the city remains susceptible to the same amount of rainfall as it was 100 years ago. (2) If these numbers hint at some possibility of a speculative analysis, then one obvious indication is of a recurring frequency

of floods with similar patterns of excessive rainfall, at a closer range than the mythical 100 years. A recent report *Why Urban India Floods* (DownToEarth Publication 2016) by the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) mentions at least seven major flood events in Chennai since 2000. Also acknowledged by many is the fact that what Chennai experienced in 2015 is not very different from the rainfall pattern of 2005, with clearly tenable links and potential lessons to be learnt. In persistently viewing each flood year as a tightly circumscribed statistical artefact refusing parallels with previous episodes, we are left with a weakly constituted knowledge that precludes a more insightful analysis. This is further compounded by an almost non-existent critical scholarship of the milestone 2005 floods, especially from the social science of disaster perspective. If we are to draw a critical analysis that is more than a speculation, we need to approach this historic data as an analytic, not simply a mathematical register. But in our eagerness to sustain the pretence of exceptionalism, we ignore the precedents staring at us in the eye stripping them of their analytically pliable referential meanings. Harsh though it might seem to those affected, the month-long torment that the inhabitants suffered was little different from the classic pattern (except perhaps in the unusual intensity of rainfall), compelling us to reconsider the allure of explanations such as the 100-year flood. If any concessions are to be made as to the extraordinary nature of the floods, then it is in regarding them as the 'worst', reflecting an unparalleled exposure rather than an unprecedented phenomenon.

Environmental knowledge and subjectivities

In the wake of the December floods, the national television channel NDTV ran a coverage declaring 'In Chennai Floods, Middle Class Among the Hardest Hit' (NDTV 2015). In this reportage, the channel profiled

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1901	40.45	62.435	0.353	1.353	12.457	18.408	131.688	182.222	120.167	198.434	304.773	382.866	1435.606
1902	31.613	15.286	0.023	2.57	15.405	21.376	139.286	163.452	139.286	131.402	193.077	1311.098	
1903	60.546	13.373	0	0	165.018	15.657	102.674	163.47	289.82	152.455	450.54	466.346	1996.893
1904	30.51	0	0	0	40.575	14.577	151.738	64.338	96.402	134.355	10.692	68.305	611.492
1905	23.1	39.407	22.514	30.526	8.865	43.271	59.71	173.428	60.562	402.585	206.647	8.495	1080.111
1906	39.448	40.595	27.133	0	4.223	14.142	109.403	168.051	186.644	92.509	136.345	349.991	1215.771
1907	0.665	0	1.235	19.613	2.423	54.107	74.128	84.294	79.345	235.806	336.737	119.642	1007.995
1908	1.059	27.617	0	0.493	10.029	19.715	70.192	104.752	238.336	438.157	191.432	36.214	1137.996
1909	70.49	4.06	0	43.033	140.127	32.091	91.625	181.595	208.334	49.23	75.178	13.908	909.671
1910	11.377	2.423	0	6.93	17.904	60.275	195.489	140.857	112.840	299.917	4.435	1118.433	
1911	0.023	0	0.312	5.809	8.677	19.859	54.572	72.43	180.731	124.225	267.897	197.872	931.759
1912	18.745	0	0	0	1.824	25.777	69.414	197.648	77.562	377.882	555.645	9.351	1333.648
1913	0.023	3.707	0	8.36	63.325	2.536	65.467	45.478	97.799	407.993	288.534	234.946	1218.168
1914	14.275	0	0.823	56.127	5.912	22.805	56.401	222.299	204.664	349.739	316.873	74.417	1324.335
1915	36.874	29.944	13.977	26.597	17.889	37.666	193.217	53.607	115.591	75.359	487.643	18.001	1205.915
1916	0.376	4.729	0	20.801	7	70.044	132.536	113.564	133.863	314.544	310.199	88.008	1188.464
1917	8.304	9.07	0	0	38.191	117.465	107.097	183.983	111.173	298.725	161.776	123.67	1159.454
1918	74.673	13.999	14.696	145.379	67.159	18.854	84.534	89.472	37.407	767.691	131.898	1449.269	
1919	8.958	0	11.349	0.153	16.019	61.651	181.17	72.311	176.318	184.998	349.434	125.331	1187.692
1920	69.756	0	0	2.928	30.062	18.9	49.519	84.258	38.981	328.009	535.828	1.435	1159.676
1921	82.928	0	0	76.21	5.247	27.353	179.514	184.66	132.858	367.234	101.616	30.762	1188.382
1922	38.778	0	0	2.03	30.237	57.436	79.978	138.853	68.547	358.63	649.648	14.311	1436.348
1923	68.962	0	20.706	0.677	4.575	43.089	41.364	62.077	77.608	250.885	53.003	74.208	697.054
1924	31.534	0	5.822	2.042	13.968	72.251	155.092	82.821	248.806	114.409	304.125	10.996	1041.266
1925	16.955	0	35.652	3.012	108.013	14.458	84.585	197.93	52.36	310.822	314.216	299.477	1437.48
1926	28.957	1.059	2.363	7.778	5.818	14.6	70.177	124.599	70.102	159.938	202.134	25.618	713.143
1927	10.775	4.015	0.871	3.377	23.032	80.999	61.98	80.398	50.123	65.457	299.117	67.393	858.11
1928	16.285	16.285	19.276	20.644	13.472	20.699	65.755	146.771	200.834	393.178	155.373	120.044	1233.981
1929	31.942	39.675	0.177	23.65	24.444	29.797	55.697	108.247	145.905	136.04	325.569	121.568	1042.775
1930	24.157	39.602	0.5	0.558	131.533	78.335	44.955	82.852	104.846	887.562	507.45	106.625	1708.975
1931	2.273	0	0	63.829	52.838	76.184	155.375	85.916	186.149	138.213	314.706	802.993	1778.476
1932	21.023	37.381	0	24.705	25.9	47.381	63.554	122.713	262.598	245.223	83.959	90.927	
1933	2.128	0	11.711	2.994	8.499	14.345	34.35	131.141	32.078	209.648	73.71	325.534	846.138
1934	44.002	0	0	27.766	2.723	80.904	60.447	132.96	43.335	48.007	110.266	39.228	979.638
1935	18.938	0	0	0	0.712	34.33	75.263	274.895	99.177	355.835	100.831	63.907	1021.888
1936	3.229	48.267	0	29.396	24.616	39.929	89.29	116.272	85.959	38.036	226.836	1029.457	
1937	3.457	1.358	0.429	72.367	11.082	47.297	70.575	151.941	139.05	236.355	515.836	136.965	1386.322
1938	0.023	32.113	20.73	0	25.856	71.623	81.027	136.268	228.774	148.57	4.124	68.062	817.17
1939	23.186	0	8.888	57.241	3.923	24.314	26.998	19.177	152.279	212.253	357.664	19.344	904.867
1940	1.1	0	11.408	1.443	138.837	43.812	89.337	106.404	95.841	186.644	457.727	106.664	1242.282
1941	28.11	3.076	0	6.002	13.691	58.537	64.923	54.621	228.942	228.337	334.143	223.694	1244.076
1942	0.023	2.071	0	10.746	8.359	62.647	27.579	148.162	82.597	102.372	102.578	235.425	800.559
1943	28.06	42.956	0	11.364	112.877	61.314	99.711	129.537	82.765	713.067	245.2	91.843	1618.694
1944	10.052	12.274	36.343	1.961	4.018	9.945	133.471	162.332	151.281	225.935	501.697	256.462	1590.176
1945	0.023	0	0.177	28.103	18.736	14.9	84.513	180.119	180.265	92.157	286.818	11.359	897.37
1946	21.33	35.464	17.417	7.06	47.524	49.676	61.807	141.717	187.277	212.728	515.988	640.322	1938.31
1947	53.494	6.998	4.247	11.401	21.151	49.113	139.103	82.994	150.726	181.568	53.806	26.8	780.881
1948	24.539	7.155	0	11.98	16.848	18.064	73.08	79.121	160.43	180.97	251.914	66.494	890.595
1949	0.476	0	0	26.557	95.715	107.311	144.627	74.901	195.958	121.344	128.018	1.435	996.282
1950	3.951	2.244	1.942	0	71.102	35.924	50.812	164.689	153.205	164.338	97.92	18.3	774.492
1951	0.853	0	4.411	49.034	57.716	37.244	85.079	151.237	83.068	88.393	148.589	1.964	707.588
1952	0.476	37.705	0	2.593	89.506	23.155	56.124	142.341	27.168	117.307	31.996	345.53	873.301
1953	1.43	12.799	0	15.561	8.761	10.637	104.443	71.531	119.175	460.934	97.75	29.963	963.751
1954	38.9	0	3.894	1.441	18.117	12.355	235.349	83.583	73.707	254.031	15.708	243.203	980.288
1955	52.83	3.867	0	46.499	176.742	40.232	81.814	197.118	152.93	199.817	128.586	118.53	1198.965
1956	17.811	1.047	0	34.035	40.029	98.174	89.88	177.516	222.723	252.93	185.575	138.19	1257.903
1957	0.023	26.146	5.712	1.707	10.218	68.932	82.1	132.752	100.91	208.319	331.739	1.847	997.728
1958	1.695	0.971	0.3	11.879	80.788	41.527	32.945	181.377	48.897	181.174	128.263	60.556	1169.172
1959	0.441	58.856	0	44.677	65.14	46.61	63.828	74.912	103.311	218.608	258.004	20.187	959.574
1960	12.258	0	0.2	2.512	10.285	93.995	103.054	75.956	205.78	145.734	651.873	101.831	1403.478
1961	33.411	48.262	0	2.453	37.305	75.738	168.125	241.576	196.308	178.16	136.937	11.896	1130.171
1962	2.398	9.206	0	1.547	29.188	124.912	85.677	92.287	243.571	137.955	366.844	75.248	87.298
1963	54.709	0	28.862	76.624	12.457	47.374	63.193	145.136	132.104	320.328	133.587	152.91	1199.694
1964	0.023	0	0	0	2.629	14.437	157.677	163.522	122.683	166.866	517.216	17.005	1162.058
1965	6.454	34.219	0	35.049	3.923	13.031	10.953	228.591	104.59	86.759	235.656	294.415	1172.14
1966	33.574	0	0	1.859	100.639	107.627	107.633	203.662	232.649	216.702	105.568	199.856	1578.337
1967	20.552	0	16.227	5.541	102.109	45.415	105.22	292.125	61.305	126.228	112.586	390.024	1246.332
1968	0.2	14.242	0.312	50.005	33.04	46.698	39.919	39.534	98.738	127.655	128.432	154.468	733.243
1969	0.476	0	0	0	85.48	41.116	110.052	138.007	13.854	509.405	149.876	155.77	1872.514
1970	0.464	17.436	1.581	5.012	14.948	47.696	178.397	188.788	138.806	121.814	419.461	10.719	1140.965
1971	13.259	16.281	11.854	23.052	61.807	39.156	112.673	87.774	132.99	351.022	643.584	154.592	1068.923
1972	8.681	0	0	2.506	79.675	73.289	63.551	133.066	78.672	384.08	167.323	402.333	1373.176
1973	0.2	0	0	0	11.723	15.09	79.668	249.647	174.177	214.488	55.864	159.475	960.332
1974	8.775	0	1.642	0.776	40.19	87.738	128.226	96.977	190.502	188.708	117.63	6.289	865.453
1975	8.198	0	0.212	0	4.495	10.109	17.877	82.366	193.346	322.447	341.414	26.578	1306.127
1976	6.035	0	2.112	0	6.312	68.643	188.72	364.627	56.695	361.309	560.769	15.411	1628.862
1977	0.376	11.245	0	10.135	40.348	79.901	74.599	186.657	114.933	460.266	460.281	15.373	1454.114
1978	9.125	24.769	0	39.058	14.536	42.384	94.506	135.347	288.943	130.42	168.817	426.257	1374.062
1979	0.094	24.223	1.147	0	5.589	124.619	21.212	99.255	82.494	164.219	136.685	510.92	67.218
1980	0.547	0	0.759	0.928	25.92	38.634	74.78	148.362					

a typical middle-class family in the southern suburb of Mudichur (touted by many as 'one of the worst affected areas in the city') who had to abandon their home during the floods and returned to find all their belongings (they referred mostly to their consumer goods, i.e. television, washing machine, refrigerator, etc.) damaged beyond repair. Used in the wake of any calamity to the role of gracious do-gooders, the middle class found it difficult to reconcile themselves to occupying the same precarious position of the poor as the 'badly affected'. Resenting being forced into a hat in hand position, the middle-class couple in this particular programme lashed out against the state as they scoffed at the paltry governmental offer of cash and material compensation (Rs. 10,000 to those who lost their homes and Rs. 5000 for those whose homes were damaged plus 10 kilograms of rice and clothing in the form of one free dhoti and saree). As one disgruntled resident said, the Rs. 5000 offered would only be adequate to get someone to clean their premises.

While it is probably an exaggeration to say that the middle class were the worst affected, there is partial truth to the argument that the floods this time wrecked as much havoc on middle-class neighbourhoods as they did on the poorer areas of the city. However, as activist Kela (2015) clarified in his online post, there are differential impacts wherein slums and shantytowns along the river are swept away almost instantly while middle-class localities suffer only considerable inconvenience. The woeful reality is the historic production of uneven flood risk areas where disasters remain a province of the poor living as they do in unstable structures on floodplains, and whose subsistence living is more severely disrupted by a recurring cycle of drought and excessive rains. Thus, as Smith (2006, n.p.) argued in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, natural disasters are in essence a social disaster as they 'simply don't flatten landscapes ... they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter'. What is interesting in the specific

case of Chennai is the way the 'naturalisation' of social contradictions (cf. Davis 1998) was framed by the two largely affected social groups, the middle class and the poor. Looking at the two in parallel helps us understand better how, in moments of crisis as this, one thinks and acts about the environment as a relevant referential category, not only at a given point of time (especially in a post-flood scenario) but also in terms of changes over time.

In this context, the aftermath of the Chennai floods presents an apt moment to reconsider the continuously shifting nature of environmental knowledge and subjectivities, especially its (re)production through social relations and institutions. Based on his research in the Himalayan district of Kumaon, Agrawal (2005) employed Luke's (1995) Foucauldian notion of environmental-ity to identify 'environmental subjects' as a category of people for whom the environment as a conceptual domain organises their thinking and in conscious relation to how they perform some of their actions. At the same time, he found that while the environment might have deep ramifications for people's social identity and well-being, their everyday practices and knowledge might not be always shaped by the environment. Pertinent to the debate here is the fact that such subjectivities are constantly made and unmade where, despite a complex knowledge production process, certain forms of knowledge are validated over others. Moreover, while environmental subjectivities are socio-historically constituted, particular conjunctures such as the floods have a major transformative potential, not only offering a critical space for the production of new subjectivities but also providing a terrain within which to foster new socio-environmental practices. This forces us to rethink the material geographies of vulnerability and the practical decisions that are ill-informed by a rather superficial understanding of the crisis, especially in terms of how people perceive their own exposure to disaster and what bearing it might have on the larger flood

narrative. Focusing on the meanings that the middle class and the poor draw out of their environmental knowledge and subjectivities thus provides for interesting revelations. In the aftermath of the floods, an immediate reaction of most of the affected middle-class residents who found themselves evacuating their homes overnight was surprise and shock that their 'brand new' residential developments were in areas vulnerable to the floods.

Over the last decade or two, the southern part of the city has been subject to a rush of urbanisation and development resulting in a massive overhaul of its geography and its natural features. Chennai-based ecologist, Jayshree Vencatesan (2007, 288) rues this forgotten fact:

'A large part of south Chennai was historically a flood plain as evidenced by the soil type of the region ... Spread over 50 sq. km, it comprised of a large marsh (Pallikaranai marsh), smaller satellite wetlands and large tracts of pasture land. Locally known as Kaiveli (a generic Tamil name for marshes and swamps), the Pallikaranai marsh drained about 250 sq. km. The numerous smaller wetlands that surrounded the marsh served as the only source of irrigation for the area, which thrived on paddy cultivation. This gave the marsh a legendary status since the villages did not have wells or dug-out ponds, which are the norm in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu.'

As a natural resource, it thus was essential during precolonial times that much of this tract remain undeveloped. But during the colonial era, a revenue-based land settlement and administration meant that wetlands were falsely identified firstly as uncultivated land and eventually as wastelands within a state classification of land uses (Vencatesan 2006). This continued into the postcolonial years as a result of which their ecological significance has been largely forgotten and making it easy to transform their use value for speculative developmental purposes. Abused by the state and citizens equally,

the marsh came to be used not only as a waste disposal site by the Corporation of Chennai but has also been actively encroached upon for residential and commercial development projects. Over the decades, Pallikaranai marsh has become a key symbol of the environmental degradation of the southern part of Chennai with large-scale infrastructure projects propelling the worst kind of capitalist urbanisation model that completely disregards its natural ecosystem. To paraphrase Ranganathan (2015), the very physicality of the wetlands (and its indeterminacy of ownership) suggests a 'consequential materiality' that is ideal for millennial capital's 'becoming-being'. It is no wonder that by the beginning of the 21st century only 10% of the marsh remained (600 ha).

Initially, there was little recognition of the significance of this loss, as the colonial administration had replaced its associated *eri* (tank or reservoir) system of rainwater catchments and spill-overs with an engineered storm water drainage system. The former is more suited to the city's flat topography, designed as they were to capture slow and gradual movement of water across the landscape through a series of interconnected bunds, but was overlaid with a storm water drainage network whose reliance on gravity in a city with very slight gradient made it difficult to capture flowing water, resulting in stagnant water pools (Jameson and Baud 2016). To this date, state governments prefer the latter despite the fact that *eris* historically served the dual purpose of groundwater recharge and flood management efficiently. As their function was displaced by storm water drains, they have rapidly decreased in numbers amidst a lack of initiative from the state towards their conservation: Chennai had more than 600 waterbodies in the 1980s with only a fraction remaining today (27 according to a report by the National Institute of Disaster Management). And the area of 19 major lakes has shrunk from 1130 ha in the 1980s to around 645 ha in the early 2000s. However, the modern

engineering infrastructure of storm water drains has been inadequate as well in compensating for the loss of this natural system. Thus, with only 855 km of storm water drains against 2847 km of urban roads, even a marginally heavy rainfall causes havoc in the city (DownToEarth Publication 2016).⁶

Ironically, it was the floods of 2002 that brought some awareness to the issue at hand when inundation of residential areas along the marshes combined with health concerns around the burning of the garbage dumped on site rallied residents together with environmental activists in the city to petition the government for remedial and mitigating measures. Eventually, in 2007, 317 ha of the marsh was declared a Reserve Forest. While civil society groups actively involved in this debate view this as a victory of sorts, the 2015 floods showed that such tokenistic gestures are insufficient as the marsh's incapacitation as a natural flood sink proved to be a major reason for flooding in the southern areas of the city. Even though Pallikaranai marsh captured public imagination as a prominent environmental debate in the first decade of the 21st century, dominating often the media headlines, most of Chennai's residents remain unaware of such ecological framings, focusing on specific aspects such as the burning of the garbage rather than the larger concern of floodplain destruction. Such a position confirms Agrawal's (2005) argument that environmental subjectivity reflects one's own knowledge and preference often based on compulsion or short-term interest, and also cautions against the limited possibility of these actions morphing into larger ideological beliefs about the environment. It is thus not surprising when many affected middle-class residents showed little geographical awareness about the ecological destruction wrought by the residential developments they had bought into. Thus, in 'Lessons from Chennai Floods' profiled by *The Hindu Business Line*, middle-class residents complained as to how they bought into the promise of

'lake view' apartments, little realising that they were built on a lake:

'I bought that apartment only in June. They said it's a lake view apartment, but the entire place looks like a lake now.' (Nirmal 2015)

Many according to this report were unaware that their residential areas were either built on a lake or a wetland as they claimed they weren't aware of the history of the place. This is unfortunate as something simple such as paying attention to the etymology of place names would have told them more than enough. Thus, most neighbourhood names in southern Chennai finish with either '*akkam*' or '*eri*', with the former referring in Tamil to a location along a waterbody while the later refers to a tank or reservoir. In the above story, residents interviewed were mostly from Perumbakkam, again 'one of the worst affected areas', its misery coming from a little acknowledged and long-forgotten geographical reality.

It isn't that the middle-class residents were not aware of their neighbourhood being in a 'low-lying area', used as they often are to rainwater stagnation of one foot or so during the monsoon period. What they didn't anticipate is the little it took for these low-lying neighbourhoods to quickly sink into flood-prone areas. As the floods emerged as a calamity that the middle class no longer witnessed at a safe distance but one they had to live through, it became clear that the environmental subjectivity of the middle class was not built on ecological awareness, rather their emphasis was on the fact that they were ignorant of any such knowledge. This aspect of not knowing is something anthropologists such as Dilley (2010) have highlighted as critical to investigations of knowledge. The emphasis is on knowledge and ignorance as being mutually constitutive, not simply as an opposition where one is seen as the negation of the other, but more importantly in terms of how a dialectic between knowledge and

ignorance is played out in specific sets of social and political relations. In the context of Chennai's middle class, their claim of lack of knowledge cannot be seen as plain ignorance but a wilful act of refusing to take notice of the environment, especially when they are capable of knowing, and perhaps might even be expected to have some sort of social obligation to know. In a similar vein, Mair et al. (2012) show that ignorance is not so much the lack of knowledge but one that incorporates certain knowledge, logics, ethics, emotions and social relationships. Following this argument, it becomes clear that the middle class, by professing to not know the rules, the ecology of the soil, vulnerability of the land, etc. have become complicit in allowing a certain kind of speculative urbanism to thrive, one that is dependent on practices that are the result of not knowing. Convinced that such knowledge was not essential, their ignorance reinforces a form of knowledge in its own right, acquiring a cognitive content and false consciousness, one that is used to justify their (lack of) environmental subjectivity. What renders this knowing/not knowing dialectic even more incongruous is the fact that most members of the middle class have found their economic prosperity through employment opportunities in a knowledge economy the success of which thrives on an ignorance economy nurtured by state and capital interests. Here, the middle class emphasise their deniability by not only avoiding knowledge but a few also insisted that it is up to the experts to produce information about risk, valorising a bourgeois mode of knowledge production and allowing environmental knowledge to be twisted by political spin. The state playing on middle-class confusions regarding environmental risks and uncertainties is not only able to contort the 'hard facts' of environmental degradation but also convince them to doubt civil society arguments as an exaggeration. 'It cannot be that bad' is what middle-class residents resort to as a response when reminded about the extent of

environmental damage to the city's natural features. This is not surprising given Mawdsley's (2009) already established scepticism about the environmental subjectivity of India's urban middle classes. Whatever exists, she argued, carries little traction, signifying an ecologically deficient environmentalism, one that is regressive and authoritarian.

On the other hand, the poor address their vulnerability of living on risky terrain not through deliberate unknowing but a carefully developed system of knowing, one that does not subscribe to the usual domains of knowledge systems and reinforces the limitations of following any kind of local/indigenous/traditional vs. Western/modern/scientific binary. Their perception of an environmentally unsafe situation is premised not on scientific knowledge but a simpler understanding of clear and present danger based on their need for surviving the annual cycle of floods. Drawing from their ethnographic research of risk perception in an Argentinian shantytown, Auyero and Swistun (2008, 369) introduce the notion of 'relational anchoring', that is, the 'cognitive heuristics people use to select and digest information about their environment—and thus their perception of hazards—are relationally anchored in everyday routines'. Driven by the necessity of knowing their hazardous environment, the poor develop a system of noesis to make sense of the inevitability of hazards and the continued disruption of their everyday lives. This is attached to a wider understanding of a risky environment which includes unsanitary living conditions, polluted drinking water and a myriad set of health-related hazards. In this context, floods are one of many risks that need to be balanced and overcome through a carefully constructed set of strategies against multiple others occurring often at the same time. As a result of this continuous exposure, what they tend to do is normalise the risk, not by ignoring it, but by cognitively and materially adapting to it, so that the perceived risk is at least lowered over time (Sara et al. 2016). It is not that

they have become accustomed to the recurring floods, but employ 'diverse knowledge that structures the course of mundane life, ranging from unconscious routines and pragmatic, problem-oriented knowledge to the general socio-cultural framework and its normative instructions for social action' (Ehlert 2012, 18).

Following the 2005 floods and the subsequent announcement by the government in 2009 of a Cooum River Restoration Project, several slum dwellers living along the banks of the Cooum River, including those in the Pudupet area were evicted and relocated to slum resettlement sites in Semmancheri and Kannagi Nagar, 30–40 km south of the city. Disregarding the fact that the latter are part of the now forgotten wetland system, the resettlement exposed the evicted slum dwellers to new kinds of vulnerability. Speaking about their experiences of resettlement, one of them explained clearly their positionality vis-à-vis vulnerability and risk:

'Yes, we lived in slums and yes, we lived in river banks. And yes, there were floods often, almost annually, some worse and some not so bad. But we coped with it. Our shelter was constructed with temporary materials (kuccha), and at the first sight of floods we would pick up our belongings and run to higher ground for shelter. Sometimes, we would have relocated all our things elsewhere in anticipation of the floods. At other times, you should see us running for our lives with our belongings on our head. Yes, we suffered when our houses were washed away and we had to rebuild them again. Initially, we agreed to move here thinking this was a better option. But there, everything else was intact: jobs, schools for our children, clinics, everything was nearby and we could access them all. But by relocating us here, this is permanent disaster. There are no jobs, no schools, no hospitals. Nothing. You think this [resettlement site] is not flood-prone. You put us in a swamp. You should see this place when the rains come. It is worse than what we faced along the river banks. We have to wade our way through at least a couple of feet of water

and there are all these snakes and other animals whose habitats we have displaced and who are now a constant threat to us.'

Even though they had no grand flood management strategy in place, using tacit knowledge or what Boyer (2008) refers to as 'para-ethnographic' knowledge and adaptive solutions, the poor developed a lifestyle of 'living with floods', one that involved the interweaving of a crude form of meteorological knowledge with their quotidian routine (here we need to resist any tendency to romanticise an indigenous knowledge system based on a perfect but non-existent man/environment relationship). That their vulnerability has been exasperated through these resettlement projects became evident in the 2015 rains when Semmancheri flooded rapidly, cutting off the resettlement sites from disaster assistance.⁷ Doshi (2013, 226) in the context of Mumbai's resettlement politics discusses how slum dwellers advance new forms of environmental politics through a subjectivity that is 'produced through the intersecting experiences and politics of redevelopment, displacement, and ecology'. However, it is hard to share her optimism that 'the spatial and relational production of environmental subjectivity among evicted slum-dwellers is key to urban spatial transformation and possibilities for social justice' (245). By the end of December 2015, in a show of quick post-floods action, officials from the Corporation of Chennai began an eviction drive clearing slums along the Adyar River. Slum dwellers from areas such as Thideer Nagar where they have lived for generations found themselves joining their counterparts from Pudupet in resettlement sites close to Semmancheri (their destination being another low-lying marshland, Ezhil Nagar in Okkiyam Thoraipakkam). Barely had they emerged from the month-long misery when the stark reality of floods-as-disaster compelled them to rethink their everyday relations with hazardscape (cf. Mustafa 2005) that they were plunged into a

nightmare, once again (and a long-lasting one), through this relocation.

The troubling aspect here is that such institutional decisions which can only be deemed as regressive were not even informed by an expert knowledge but an arbitrary decision-making process that overrides any form of knowledge system providing a suitably different reading of environmental change (especially one that holds the state accountable as an environmental subject). Accompanying this is the usual hogwash of heavy-handed solutions for controlling flood and other ecological risks. Such responses are reactions to the floods as a specific shock rather than considering the challenge of a continuous process of water management through a hydrological cycle. Led by middling bureaucrats who take little into account of the diversity of people's ecological framings, hard sciences continue to dominate policymaking. Disregarding the historic, generative causes of such risk and the myriad subtle connections between humans and nature, this misplaced belief in artifice's ability to tame nature has led to a chronic reliance on flood-control technologies as the undisputed answer to tackling such disasters in the future.

In the case of Chennai, one of the major causes of the 2015 floods was the blocking of Okkiyam Maduvu, a channel which in the natural scheme of things is crucial to draining excess rainwater from the Pallikarainai marsh into the sea. But at 16 km from the sea, this is a slow process of drainage, firstly into the man-made Buckingham Canal which in turn discharges into the Kovalam estuary. In 2009, acknowledging the length of time this takes, a flood alleviation programme proposed the construction of a short-cut diversion channel that would drain rainwater directly from Buckingham Canal to the sea, one that would be faster than the slower system of marshland natural drainage. Even though the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in its 2014 report reproached the government for defective planning of flood-control projects in

Chennai, it is disheartening to see its emphasis on techno-engineering solutions as it endorsed schemes for short, straight canals and flood protection walls, sanctioning controversial land acquisition as well as clearing of encroachments to meet the alignment criteria of such schemes. Thus, in the aftermath of the 2015 floods, the Tamil Nadu State Government Chief Minister Jayalalithaa announced that a detailed investigation would be taken to have a regulated canal (straight cut) directly to the sea from the Buckingham Canal, adjoining Okkiyam Maduvu. This, she believed, would be the best long-term solution for not only ensuring faster discharge of surplus water during heavy rainfall but also allow a certain amount of fresh water to remain in the wetland. One can only be wary of such solutions especially in light of Das's (2014) scepticism about effective flood-control planning which according to him has lost out to the political economy of corruption and the inefficiencies intrinsic to a system at the mercy of patronage relationships. Such solutions are not even about the challenges of expertise-driven planning prioritising professional knowledge and practices but about the blind spot created by a state-driven assumption that risk can be managed with engineering solutions. In this collapse of a socio-natural understanding of environmental risk, the greatest challenge is our failure to acknowledge that 'a single hazard in a place is the outcome of interactions of geographical variables across spatial scales' (Mustafa 2005, 566).

Rescaling the 'urbanisation of disaster' discourse

Barely had the city recovered from the 1200 mm of rainfall it had received during the month of November (generally considered to be the city's annual quota) when, between 1 and 2 December, the city received 345 mm of rain, a much-touted meteorological record over a 24-hour period in the month of December (the previous maximum of

261.2 mm was 114 years ago in 1901). In the following days, Chennai witnessed the worst of the floods, one that was exasperated by two factors. First is the spatial variability of rainfall as more rains lashed peripheral areas than the city, wherein against the city's 35 cm there was 49 cm of rainfall in Tambaram (south-west in Kanchipuram district), 47 cm in Chembarambakkam (west in Kanchipuram district) and Ponneri (north in Thiruvallur district) received 39 cm. A Rapid Assessment Report produced by the Indian Institute of Science and Indian Institute of Technology (2016) observed that the 24-hour rainfall in the city was more like a 25-year storm (rainfall intensity peaking at 35 mm/h) whereas that recorded in Chembarambakkam on the outskirts was more like a 100-year storm (rainfall intensity peaking at nearly 60 mm/h). With the natural rainwater drains, run-offs and spill-overs blocked off by a reckless and unregulated process of peri-urbanisation, excess water quickly breached the shrunken tanks, reservoirs and canals, flooding initially the surrounding areas and eventually the city. Second is the controversial decision of the state government to release 29,000 cubic feet per second (cusecs) of water from Chembarambakkam reservoir. According to official reports, on the afternoon of 1 December, as the reservoir was reaching its maximum capacity (3645 million cubic feet), the Chennai district collector issued a press statement that water will be released from the reservoir at the rate of 5000 cusecs, possibly increasing the overflow to 7500 cusecs, and advised people residing along the banks of the Adyar River to move to safer areas. By the morning of 2 December, with most areas of Chennai within a radius of 7 km on either side of the Adyar River under water, it was clear that this was simply not from heavy rainfall and that more than 7500 cusecs had to have been released to unleash this kind of damage.⁸ That those in charge underestimated the implications of the river's wider geographical basin was apparent from this particular disaster.

There are three major rivers flowing through the Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA), Kosasthalaiyar, Cooum and Adyar, each of them being part of a larger, regional watershed system, with their own defining characteristics. The CMA covers 1189 km² over three districts (176 km² of Chennai district, 637 km² of Thiruvallur district and 376 km² of Kanchipuram district) (Figure 2). The Kosasthalaiyar River originates about 100 km from Chennai to the north-west in North Arcot district, with its main branch feeding the Poondi reservoir (the largest in the city), before travelling through Thiruvallur district and the CMA, finally joining the sea at Ennore Creek. The Cooum River is a bifurcation from the main Kosasthalaiyar River, flowing mostly through Kanchipuram district before entering the city and draining at Napier's Bridge into the sea. The Adyar River has modest beginnings from Malaipattu tank near Sriperumbudur in Kanchipuram district, appearing only as a stream from the point where water from Chembarambakkam tank joins the river. Cooum and Adyar constitute two important rivers in the city, marking geographically, during the city's colonial foundations, its northern and southern boundaries. Even though within the CMA both the rivers cut across in an easterly direction to a short distance of 24 km, they are very different as river basins. Thus, the Cooum River, 72 km in total length, has a macro drainage area of 502 km², carrying the surplus from 75 tanks in its catchment area and a bankfull discharge of 991 m³/s. On the other hand, the Adyar River is a shorter 42 km, with a larger macro drainage area of 720 km², 450 tanks feeding into it and has a bankfull discharge of 2038 m³/s, twice that of the Cooum River (Narasimhan et al. 2016). It is therefore not surprising that most historic accounts of Chennai's earlier floods often refer in particular to the flooding of the Adyar River. In the specific context of the December 2015 floods, even though the outflow from Chembarambakkam tank itself was only 800 m³/s, the

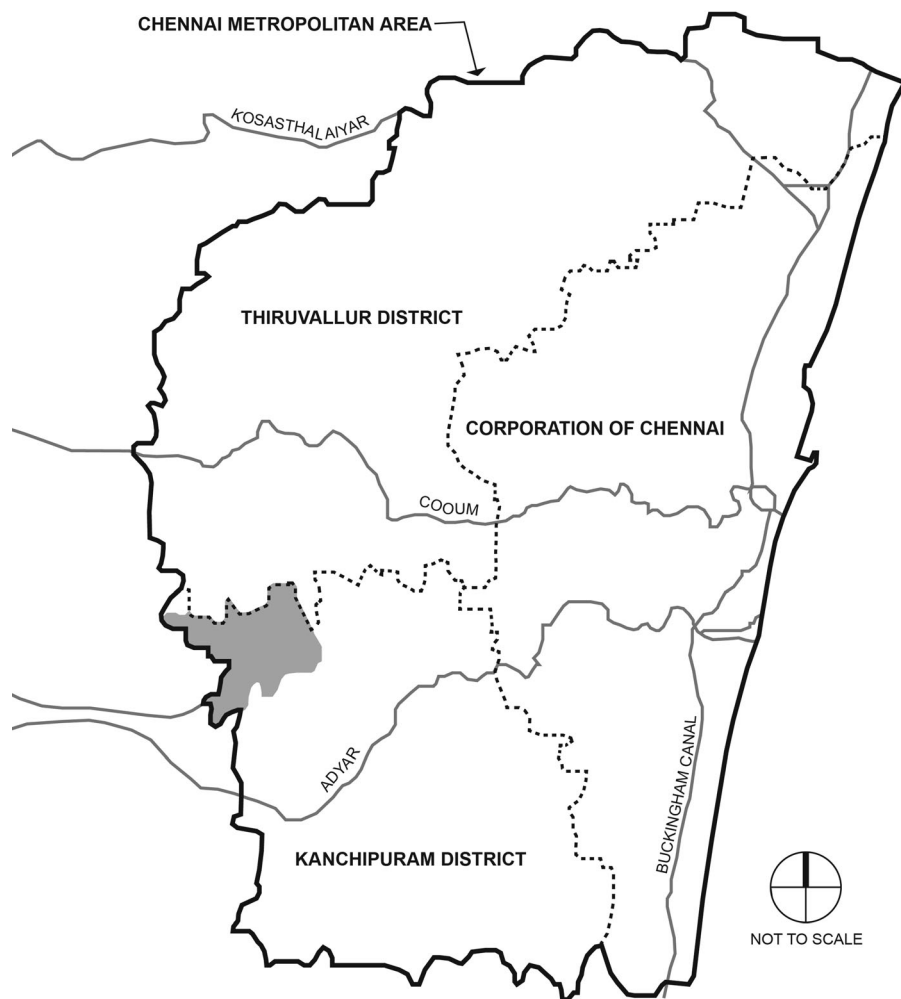


Figure 2 Chennai's city and metropolitan boundaries with its river systems.

overflow from its inter-linked system of smaller *eris*, canals and drains meant that the flood flow of the river peaked at 3800 m³/s, exceeding 60,000 cusecs of water (way beyond its capacity of 40,000 cusecs).

The frustrating aspect of this debate around why and should the government have released so much water from Chembarambakkam tank with such little notice is that this is not the first time surplus water from Chembarambakkam tank has been released under similar circumstances exasperating an existing flood-like situation in the city. Earlier in November, 18,000 cusecs of water

had been released with calamitous flooding in the nearby neighbourhoods of Mudichur, West Tambaram and Manapakkam. Even though some noise had been made over its disastrous consequences, given their peripheral location, it didn't raise as much concern as the one that followed the December deluge. While similar amounts of water had been let out from Poondi reservoir into the Cooum River, with not so much rainfall in its catchment area and its differing nature of flood water discharge meant that there was minimal flooding of the Cooum River. But Chembarambakkam has its own precedents

which were conveniently ignored. On the night of 24 November 1976, facing the consequences of a severe cyclonic storm, state officials released 28,000 cusecs of water with deadly flooding of settlements and neighbourhoods along the Adyar riverbanks (EPW 1976). This practice continued through almost every single major flood episode in the city (1985, 1996, 2005 and 2008). While the government was quick to release a press statement defending its decision, it shows the need to understand better the hydrological regimes of Chennai's river systems and its associated socio-natural risks. While such disasters echo the futility of command and control schemes managed by engineers and flood mitigation experts deferring to the decisions of bureaucrats and politicians, there is an urgent need for tackling floods as complex riverine phenomena whose dynamics are framed by a geomorphology of a wider floodplain. This is also perhaps one instance where we would be better served looking backwards rather than forwards. Thus, alongside a tendency to populate the debate with a spate of mostly scientific and quantitative analyses of flooding through georeferencing, hydrological modelling and generating impressive GIS (geographical information system) as well as remote sensing maps, what is equally required is a critical historiography of how specific watershed areas have been socio-politically manipulated and transformed.

This is particularly pertinent in the case of Chembarambakkam tank and its metamorphosis from an irrigation tank to a standby water supply reservoir for the city. Until the 1990s, Chembarambakkam was a historic irrigation tank feeding the paddy fields of the surrounding 168 agricultural villages, covering a catchment area of 357 km² (Kolappan 2015). It is crucial to the Adyar River sub-basin controlling nearly 40% of its water with the remaining 60% coming from other major and minor tanks upstream. Understanding this is crucial as the upper catchment area (including the Chembarambakkam tank) occupies 75% of the total area of the Adyar

River sub-basin and has a major say in the way the river floods and thereby affects the city which is further downstream (Vidyapriya et al. 2012; Figure 3). In the early 1990s, based on the World Bank practice of encouraging inter-sectoral reallocation of irrigation water using precedents of buying out farmers' rights to irrigation tanks (especially in peri-urban contexts), the state government of Tamil Nadu sanctioned the reallocation of the tank from irrigation to general purposes (in this context, specifically for Chennai's drinking water supply). Since 2000, the tank has been used to convey water to Porur Lake as well as a reservoir for the diverted water from the Krishna Water Supply Project, alongside the construction of a 540 mld water treatment plant on site. We cannot pick too many bones here over its transformation as Swyngedouw (2009) reminds us that hydraulic environments are in essence socio-physical constructions that are actively and historically produced and thus there is nothing a priori unnatural about reconstructing them as large-scale water infrastructure projects. However, what is worrying is the resulting environmental change where, over the past two decades, an intricate system of established agricultural canals that used to lead out of the tank has disappeared. This can be mainly attributed to the specific pattern of peri-urbanisation following the re-designation of the nearby town of Sriperumbudur as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and its related development as an industrial corridor attracting global automotive and telecommunication industries. Referred to as India's 'new Shenzhen' (Homm and Bohle 2012), the area has witnessed a rapid depletion of its sensitive natural habitat, privileging the growth of factories over flora and fauna. It is not surprising that most of these plants (including Hyundai, Renault-Nissan, Daimler, Ford, etc.) quickly submerged in water suspending their operations for several days. Also, by dumbing the tank down from its complex function as an irrigation reservoir to a surface-water conservation



Figure 3 Chennai Metropolitan Area in the context of the Chennai River basin and the Adyar River sub-basin.

reservoir, state bureaucrats and technocrats did not address all factors such a shift entails. Thus, every time the state has tried using Chembarambakkam as a flood-control reservoir, it has failed miserably. As one of the largest tanks in the CMA, its design was meant for irrigation purposes, with an exit as high as possible to irrigate maximum land. But for urban water supply and flood management the exit needs to be low with overflow across a minimum surface area. In re-imagining the tank from a surplus to a

scarcity reservoir, state authorities have tampered with its socio-hydrological function, irreparably changing its relationship with its wider landscape without rectifying its original physiography.

This pushes us to question once again the prevalent emphasis on expertise, questioning the social figure of the expert and its epistemic consequences (Boyer 2008). Often based on a flawed logic, their decisions have continually made the city more vulnerable. What is also annoying is the way they

invoke inevitability as an inchoate reasoning, in this case, letting the water out being inevitable, reminding us of Kelman's (2006) argument that assuming inevitability is less elegant and more damaging as it leaves no room for contingency. Following stringent criticism of the government's decision to release water from Chembarambakkam tank, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Tamil Nadu issued a press note on 13 December emphasising that they followed the Rules for Flood Regulation as stipulated in the Compendium of Rules of Regulation of the Public Works Department which requires the state to '*balance the interests of water storage for the scarcity period, the need to control flooding in downstream areas and the safety of the reservoir*' (original emphasis).⁹ But as already noted, achieving this balance is impossible given the contradictory operational mechanisms embedded in the function of a water storage versus a flood-control reservoir. Denying the interference of bureaucrats and politicians, the press statement emphasised the 'engineer' as the competent authority, reinforcing their role in the technical management of urban space within regional industrial systems (Gandy 1997). Disregarding the possibility of following meteorological predictions to make decisions well ahead in time, there was once again a statistical simplification of the de facto pattern of rainfall, where much of the explanation suggests a tendency to mistake correlation for causation, imprisoning the discourse of floods within a narrow ecological imagination.

The December floods indicate even more the need to consider the aggregate of extreme events over an expanded sense of the region. There is an unevenness to urbanisation with substantial local variations, which combined with an increasingly heterogeneous rainfall spread requires us to widen the scope of a hydro-meteorological region for any kind of useful analysis. Thus, a simple 'urbanisation of disaster' argument pointing to disaster risk as a manifestation of urban growth and its depleting effects on ecosystems is insufficient.

Rescaling our dissection of Chennai floods as a peri-urbanisation and regionalisation of disaster shows that neither is the ecosystem secure at this scale nor can we assume that looking at the watershed or river basin will promote a better holistic understanding of human–environment relations. Nevertheless, rethinking the socio-natural risks of floods in the 21st century is better served by rescaling its ramifications beyond a city or even metropolitan demarcations (defined arbitrarily by the convenience of governance structures) and redrawing ecosystem boundaries to a biophysically determined region. In this context, the December floods forces us also to address the fact that what we are dealing with here is not a plain hydrological cycle but a more complex hybridised form of socio-natural flow, one that is nested within an unstable scalar configuration that is perpetually constructed and reconstructed (Swynedouw 2004).

Final remarks: the futility of resilience

The irony here is that only a year earlier, in December 2014, Chennai was amongst three Indian cities (including Surat and Bangalore) selected to the proud roster of 35 cities joining the 100 Resilient Cities Programme set up by the Rockefeller Foundation (with a funding of \$100 million), a pioneering initiative to help cities around the world become more resilient to the physical, social and economic challenges of the 21st century. According to a statement released by the network, Chennai was chosen based on a coordinated disaster response plan developed in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In addition, it appreciated the city for making efforts to build on experience, learning from past events and continuing to provide best-practice solutions to other regions. And yet, as this paper establishes, this is pure drivel given the way the city has treated every disaster as 'unprecedented' and there is little jurisprudence to the way policies are proposed in

their aftermath. One of the first steps emerging from the 100 Resilient Cities Programme was the purported appointment of a Chief Resilience Office for the city, a position that remains unfilled even in the wake of the December floods. There has, however, been no end to the numerous workshops conducted and reports produced since the beginning of 2016. While some are useful, most simply perpetuate the tripe that dominates these conversations. Typically, they bring together a diverse range of international and local experts to identify best practices and tangible ideas that could help Chennai become more flood resistant in the future. Recommendations generally include mega-engineering solutions such as redirecting the flows of rivers (actions that were responsible for the floods in the first place), and construction of artificial channels and outlets, all offered by a multitude of global consultancies seeking lucrative contracts. Even though some caution against overreliance on technical responses, most wilfully ignore the critical issue of disappearing wetlands, floodplains and waterbodies. It makes us question the usefulness of a resilience discourse, especially one that unquestioningly transmits scientific information from a known, intentional source (the experts) to a passive set of willing recipients, that is, the state authorities and the public. The problem here is that such expertise is underwritten by professional and institutional knowledge and practices (mostly from the outside), prioritising tangible and visible solutions. There is also a sense of pointlessness to such deliberations as they merely join a long line of schemes that have been enthusiastically proposed but rarely implemented. Over the years, state officials have announced any number of flood protection strategies, both structural and non-structural, but as a CAG audit for 2013 and 2014 found most of these suffer from an endless spiral of delayed decision-making and increasing costs.

The other vexing issue with resilience is its promulgation of a culture of optimism where cities always bounce back as they are rebuilt

all the time. Taking for granted their durability, the premise of post-disaster urbanism is that modern cities almost always recover from disaster. It detracts us from addressing its conflict-ridden nature as well as questions about equity. This is flagged by Vale and Campanella (2005) who find that resilience as a function of political power is perhaps nothing more than a rhetorical device. Cultivating a prematurely progressive narrative, its manipulation by capital makes it inherently controversial. It is thus difficult to share the enthusiasm of the *City* journal debate where Taylor and Schafran (2016) maintain that resilience can be redeemed if it critically engages with the everyday and actually existing politics and processes, and that it can be a means of both imagining and building better urban futures. If one goes by the simple definition of resilience as the ability to bounce back, then yes, Chennai has demonstrated remarkable resilience in the aftermath of the devastating floods. Within a few weeks, scant traces of disaster remained (mostly seen in garbage pile ups and abandoned cars), as the city seemed to recoup its losses as quickly as possible. But to seek comfort in such a capability engenders a false sense of confidence, till the next disaster strikes. The concern about employing a resilience discourse here is not even in terms of it possibly being a neo-liberal connotation (cf. Zeiderman 2016), but at a simpler level. By focusing on resilience, city governance officials do not bother to fix the problems at hand, or if they do, it is done shoddily, only making the problems worse, as seen in state responses to averting a flood-like situation again in the future. In this case, risk signifies a condition where human and non-human threats are constantly looming, thus becoming the new parable to justify brutal political actions such as evicting slum dwellers from the riverbanks barely a few weeks after the floods. The immediacy of the disaster allows a constitutive relationship between politics and risk, invoking key framings of the resilience discourse including vulnerability, mitigation, threat, etc. to set aside

rights and entitlement arguments of the urban poor and justify their resettlement. Arguments such as the right to the city as invoked by the urban poor in their struggles to assert some semblance of citizenship is disabled by the idiom of resilience.

It is not just the poor who have had to bear the brunt but also civil society activists whose efforts at highlighting the environmental risks posed by capitalist modes of urbanisation, and calling for immediate as well as long-term remedial action have been neatly side-stepped by the state, dismissing their hard facts as their usual rant. With no possibility of a state–civil society alliance in the future, at least as far as environmental actions are concerned, in the post-floods scenario, we are left with an environmental subjectivity that shows little promise of being socio-ecologically progressive. This pessimism is seen in Catterall's (2016, 2–8) reflection that the breakdown that ensued was

'on the one hand, an example of the fragility of our technological condition, an intricate array of communication systems and work patterns, at a time of increasing globalisation and acute climate change, but also, on the other, of the fragility of our knowledge and understanding of our condition, and underlying this despite easy talk ... about contestation, of reform versus revolution (now safely evaded through resilience?) the creation/destruction opposition (now safely amalgated?), of "urban" versus the rural and "the city", of commodities and commodification, paradigms and epistemologies. ... These are insecure foundations.'

His biggest concern is however

'An approach to urbanisation that marginalises the earthy riverrun planet, the commodification of knowledge that supports such marginalisation, such are the insecure foundations that sanitised new epistemologies hide and that a genuine paradigm shift needs to secure.'

As the disaster hangover slowly fades away, and we forget the complexity of factors

comprising the root cause, the paradigm shift that Catterall (2016) calls for seems far away given the continued preference of the state and its allied actors for the legitimacy of probability and statistically driven inputs. Thus, when the Chief Secretary to the Government of Tamil Nadu insists that the floods were a 'rarest of rare natural calamity' and that the flooding was caused primarily due to very heavy rainfall, it makes us wonder if we are being naive in suggesting the possibility of an alternative culture of knowledge, and believing that it will provide ammunition for a more critical approach in the future.

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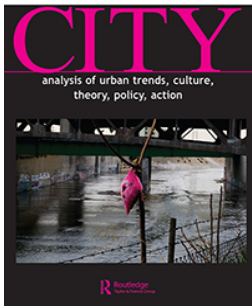
Notes

- 1 #ChennaiRainshelp and @ChennaiRainsOrg were amongst the prominent ones who provided an information platform to help Chennaiites during the floods.
- 2 The comment about 'unseasonal rains' shows the lack of geometeorological knowledge amongst India's leaders who generally assume that the entire country is served by the South-west or summer monsoons (June–September). Tamil Nadu is part of the minor group of south-eastern states in India who receive almost 50% of their annual rainfall from the North-west or winter monsoons (October–December). Regarding the construction of the event as a global weather anomaly, see Bell (2015).
- 3 Niethyanand Jayaraman is one environmental activist who has berated the state and its allied capitalist interests (including mega-infrastructure projects) for incapacitating the city against the onslaught of

- monsoons. See his post that appeared in <http://scroll.in/article/769928/chennai-floods-are-not-a-natural-disaster-theyve-been-created-by-unrestrained-construction> (accessed 24 February 2016).
- 4 The combination of largely material-based clientalism and patronage politics with programmatic policies is characteristic of the Dravidian parties that have ruled Tamil Nadu since 1967. See Wyatt (2013) for a more detailed discussion of the differentiating nuances. In the May 2016 Assembly elections to the state of Tamil Nadu, the ruling party ADMK managed to retain power but suffered electoral losses in 10 out of 16 Chennai constituencies, attributed by many to their poor ground action during the floods.
 - 5 When Neil Smith (2006) wrote that there is no such thing as a natural disaster, he was picking up on the common adage that hazards are natural while disasters are man-made.
 - 6 This figure is contradicted by the Corporation of Chennai which claims that it maintains a Storm Water Drain network of 1660.31 km within the city against 6000 km of roads. Whatever the number, it shows that less than 30% of the city's roads are lined with the necessary service infrastructure.
 - 7 Again, the lack of etymological knowledge regarding place names is clear as one needs to only look at the suffix *eri* in Semmancheri to understand its original role as a reservoir.
 - 8 I am grateful to Sandhya Ravishankar's in-depth analysis that appeared in thewire.in/17468/as-chennai-flooded-officials-fiddled/ (accessed 28 July 2016).
 - 9 Press Note No. 188 released on 13 December 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.tn.gov.in/pressrelease/archives> (accessed 26 July 2016).
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Infrastructural gap

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Infrastructural gap

Commons, state and anthropology

Dimitris Dalakoglou

An infrastructural gap (IG) emerged after the outbreak of the crisis in 2008 and it refers to the difficulty of the state and the private sector in sustaining the level of infrastructural networks in the Western world. Yet, infrastructures comprise the realm where the state or the market materialize a great proportion of the social contract. Citizens therefore often experience IG as a challenge of the entire political paradigm. Nevertheless, as research in the country that is at the center of the current euro-crisis—Greece—records, we have novel and innovative forms of civil activity focused on the IG. Such activity, applying principles of self-organization and peer-to-peer relationships, along with practices of social solidarity and ideals of commons, attempts to address IG in innovative ways. However, such practices call for theoretical and empirical innovations as well, in order to overcome the social sciences' traditional understandings of infrastructures. This paper—based on the inaugural professorial lecture I gave in acceptance of the Chair in Social Anthropology at the Vrije University Amsterdam—seeks to initiate a framework for understanding this shift in the paradigm of infrastructures' governance and function, along with the newly emerging infrastructural turn in socio-cultural anthropology.

Key words: infrastructures, state, commons, anthropology, Greece

Infrastructural gap and the (too) invisible hand of the market

Between 2006 and 2013 alone, European infrastructure companies' activities decreased by 80% (Linklaters 2014). The International Energy Agency has warned that even the European Union's (EU) energy security is under threat unless there are investments in the infrastructures (IEA 2014). Articles in the Press (Authers 2015) use terms such as 'infrastructural gap' (IG) for the 40% investment shortfall on infrastructure development in G20 countries. Similarly, the World Economic Forum also warned

about the IG (WEF 2014). In 2015, the European Commission (EC) responded to these challenges with the new strategic investment plan that has infrastructures investment as its first priority. However, it was made clear in all related documents that the EC is unable to fully finance it and needs the private sector's contribution (EIB 2015). But the market does not seem eager to get involved: the EU was portrayed as an unattractive destination for private investment in infrastructures by the authoritative Global Infrastructure Investment Index (ARCADIS 2014). Meanwhile, an EU member country (Greece) lies at the bottom of the Index.

Yet, infrastructures are a principle materialization of the relationship between people (citizens and non-citizens alike) and otherwise abstract state and supra-state authorities (Edwards 2003, 186; Graham 2010; Humphrey 2005; Dourish and Bell 2007, 417; Dalakoglou 2009; Larkin 2013). It therefore follows that the IG raises questions not only about the future of both hard and soft infrastructures, but the future of the relationship between European states and societies. By extension what is at stake is the future of European bourgeois democracy, as was already noticed in reference to the paradigmatic shifts in the Greek polity that followed the troika-instructed adjustments (Balibar 2010; Habermas 2012, 2015; Žizek 2015).

If the IG in reference to hard infrastructures is not felt that much as yet within Europe, what is for sure experienced by the masses is the gap in soft infrastructures. Since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, European countries have continued to face challenges to their budgets in education, childcare, public health, welfare and even emergency services. One of the most recent examples of IG in soft infrastructures (and by extension of the changing relationship between European state apparatuses and society) is the so-called refugee crisis. Here we see the world's richest continent—the place that claims to host the most modern and elaborated polities—being reticent to respond in a humane or otherwise effective manner to the arrival of a couple of million refugees.¹ Furthermore, in the Netherlands, IG in soft infrastructures in statements about a shift from the welfare state to a 'participation society', whereas in Britain the concept of the 'big society' has been put forward as a new paradigm for the delivery of public services. At the same time, in the European countries most affected by the crisis—Greece and Portugal—ministries of social solidarity have recently been created, aiming to partly aid but mostly to co-opt grassroots activities that have been developed spontaneously in areas where the market or the state have traditionally operated, but do so no longer.

From the 'modern infrastructural ideal' to the IG

Although right now neither the state nor the market seem able to cover the increasing IG, this is the outcome of a long process. Most of the second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of the 'modern infrastructural ideal' in both Western and Eastern Europe with state monopolies or strict control over critical infrastructural systems (Graham and Marvin 2001; Dalakoglou 2009). Then just before the age of the IG, neoliberalism saw an explicit passage from state infrastructure provision towards private sector or public-private sector partnerships during the 1990s and 2000s. Arguably, one of the main reasons such public-private partnerships became popular during the 1990s has to do with the collapse of Communism in Europe. The political antagonism between the two systems was probably a good reason for Western states to provide as much as possible to their citizens—in terms of social policy, infrastructures or other provisions. At the same time, the other side of the Iron Curtain had developed quite an infrastructural fetishism, both theoretically but also practically, resulting in a situation where both systems were explicitly competing for the consent of their citizens via their superiority as providers of services and infrastructures (Humphrey 2005; Dalakoglou 2009, 2016a). Indeed, after the collapse of socialism and the new *modus operandi* of the Eastern European world system—neoliberal reforms, strict austerity in social policy and the limitation of state provisions—it was only a matter of time for the market to become a big player in the Western European infrastructural realm (see Dalakoglou 2016b).

We should add here that it was quite common for the private partner to benefit from the public-private agreements, as the representatives of the public sector (politicians) claimed a lack of expertise or knowhow and proposed the technocratic knowledge of the private sector as the key to a more effective, financially and

technologically sustainable form of infrastructural development. The technocrats employed to give such advice often represented the interests of the private sector, or even of specific corporations. Thus, the margins for profit were large and more flexible. Moreover, this explains the creative destruction of material infrastructure, namely, why so many infrastructural projects that were perfectly functional were demolished and rebuilt from scratch all over Europe, especially in the East of the continent, but certainly not only there (Dalakoglou 2013, 2016a; Brekke et al. 2014). The 1990s witnessed the start of what Pierre Bourdieu (1998) had called ‘the utopia of unlimited exploitation’—or growth of the built environment for its own sake—and the sake of the private sector (Dalakoglou 2016b, 2016c). Nevertheless, now that the European public sector needs a hand, after sponsoring private infrastructural interests for several decades, the celebrated ‘invisible hand of the market’ is all too invisible.

‘We are the infrastructure’: from IG to the commons

‘We are the infrastructure; the state and capital failed’, so I was told during my last major period of ethnographic fieldwork in Athens (from December 2012 to September 2014). My insightful informant was a man in his 60s who was involved in the movement for guerrilla urban gardening in the city’s southern suburbs (the Elliniko-Argyroupoli district). This movement has succeeded in occupying parts of a former US Air Force Base, transforming it into a shared allotment with vegetables and herbs. Participants are also actively involved in the appropriation of the old Athens airport, adjacent to the American base, for similar uses.

In the early 2000s, Athens saw the construction of a new airport under a public–private partnership that allegedly favored the private part (the German construction giant Hochtief). Soon the facilities of the

old airport were privatized, and even though its premises constitute a huge plot of land on a beautiful part of the Mediterranean seafront within a European capital city, it was recently sold for a mere fraction of its recommended price—very recently, in fact, as the agreement between the new owner, Lamda Development, and the Greek authorities was only signed on 6 June 2016. However, any potential investor will have to remove the people who make use of this area daily for their walks, cycling and other sport activities. They will also have to deal with the 2000 olive trees planted there as an act of guerrilla urban agriculture, as well as the self-organized social solidarity clinic and other similar facilities that are housed in the old airport’s premises, which aim to benefit the local community. Although they clearly have the characteristics of a radical social movement, the various initiatives located in the old airport attract an enormously diverse range of people; as this is not simply occupation by the usual suspects of the activist community but something well beyond them.

Even if the investors manage to kick out all these people who use the park and their activities, and even if the small private city proposed in the plans is built, the truth is that the whole movement around the old airport of Elliniko is manifesting a shift in the ways that the society imagines its infrastructures and its relationship with the state authorities, private investors, etc. Over time the protests against the privatization of the airport evolved into an elaborate demand for the creation of a self-organized metropolitan park. The proposals formed collectively by activists, local residents and even with the participation of local municipal authorities, involved small-scale, low-cost changes to the landscape, common use of the grounds, self-organized forms of management, etc. This was done more or less in accordance with a model inspired by the de-growth movement, which was already being applied spontaneously, for example, in the form of the self-organized planting of the

thousands of olive trees between airport runways.

Ethnographically, it is worth mentioning that some of those involved often draw interchangeably on the terms of ‘public benefit/good’ (demosio kalo/agatho, δημόσιο καλό/αγαθό) and ‘common benefit/good’ (koino kalo/agatho, κοινό καλό/αγαθό) when referring to their activities. But what appears to be confusion between the terms ‘public’ and ‘common’ is not really that. This interchangeable use of terms is a result of an explicit shift from notions of the public (which is even gaining negative connotations today) towards ideals of a post-capitalist economic paradigm. Although this refers to a novel realm of socio-economic and political practice that is being shaped now, one cannot ignore the rapidly transformed ways that infrastructures are imagined in Greece. Infrastructures changed from a desired or undesired object in the 1970s, to an emblem of absolute materialization of development and progress in the 1990s–mid-2000s, to a symbol of political scandals in the late 2000s and eventually to a domain of social contestation in the 2010s (Dalakoglou and Kallianos 2014, [forthcoming](#)). The changing ways of perceiving infrastructures came together with transformations in the conceptions of public. Public ownership and expansion of the public sector mutated gradually from a political and social goal in the 1970s–1980s, to something synonymous to the impersonal state and the governing parties, closely related to notions of corruption, social and economic devaluation, etc. Thus, what were once the marginalized practices of a few anarchist groups since the 1980s that were squatting buildings in the cities or premises within university campuses, are gradually evolving today into a new arena of social and political operation (Dalakoglou and Vradis 2011; Dalakoglou 2012). Thus, the everyday use of the concept ‘common’ is going beyond and above the public and remains a word that has mostly positive connotations in contemporary Greece. Common are considered

something that is truly beneficial for the community and not in fake ways, as with notions of ‘public’ co-opted by the state. After all, the entire story of Elliniko occupation is precisely an explicit example of the so-called collaborative commons: principles of access vs. ownership, democratic self-management vs. hierarchical management or environmental sustainability vs. growth are applied (Ostrom 1990).²

Similarly, all around the Mediterranean the refugee crisis which was a sad manifestation of the inability—and lack of desire—of the state apparatuses to mobilize a soft infrastructural system in order to organize some reception and welfare apparatuses saw this IG covered partly by grassroots and self-organized socio-technological emergency mechanisms. In other European countries like Britain we saw other informal networks, for example, families covering the lack of social housing and the privatization of higher education (ONF 2016); even in the Netherlands we see the emergence of self-organized initiatives (Uitermark 2015). Moreover, in the USA we saw the grassroots, self-organized initiative Occupy Sandy not only compensating for public sector cuts in the emergency apparatuses affecting thousands of victims when superstorm Sandy hit the East Coast in 2012, but in fact creating new spheres of social operation (Jaleel 2013). All these phenomena refer to some explicit socio-technological innovations which created a novel domain of operation that went well beyond the state–private–civil society triptych and challenged established models from below and in a critical manner.

Bigger or participatory?

In the everyday life practices that are attempting (and sometimes managing) to overcome the IG towards collaborative and different infrastructural formations, what is primarily at stake is a fundamental transformation of the very essence of social relationships. Although terms like ‘big’ and

'participatory' are used by the political leadership in reference to the requested social changes, in fact these are not the precise social transformations that are needed. The Greek and Portuguese examples manifest more correctly the changes required by the current conditions when the political leadership there refers to what in classical social theory (Durkheim 1893) is the determinant factor of social organization: solidarity. Words generally forgotten by European governments for years, words that until recently belonged mostly to marginalized social movements—such as 'solidarity', society and the commons—are actively mobilized by official governmental agents under the current state of exception. Certainly, they seem to be embedded within the context of austerity and crisis; so one needs to be very careful not to get things confused as it is a very different kind of solidarity, commons and self-management that people organize and governments intend. However, such calls represent an ongoing shift of historical proportions, and represent the political emergency. One needs to remember that the governing party in Britain, that now is desperately looking not only for society but for even bigger society to rescue the economic system, is the vanguard of neoliberalism in Europe, which 20 years ago claimed that 'there is no such thing as society' via its leader Margaret Thatcher.

So whilst the agents of state apparatus seem to understand this as an orchestrated top-down process, as the few examples I mentioned above show, it seems to be something that people across the world have already been putting into practice since the beginning of the crisis. Although there is a series of novel technologies and social techniques related to the so-called sharing, social and solidarity economies or even with the so-called platform capitalism that might potentially help the shaping of these novel socio-technological formations to take infrastructural properties, in principle it is the social dimensions which are the catalyst and have the formidable role. What is at stake is a

radical transformation of social relationships and the mechanisms of social reproduction within current material conditions. In these new conditions, social subjects are learning to act and think of their individual and collective selves, their relationships with those around them, as well as with the state and its infrastructures in novel ways. What we are dealing with, therefore, is a set of purely ethnographic and explicitly anthropological, and sociologically qualitative questions. These questions address new forms of identity, new forms of social bonds and social action that are being shaped or have to be shaped under the current circumstances, in which both the state and the market are abandoning a number of realms where they have traditionally operated. This new social activity operates within novel and innovative realms that challenge other traditional divisions such as the ones between the private and the public, the material and the social or soft and hard infrastructures, the digital and the analogue, the political and the social, etc. And indeed all this shift is of crucial importance in the case of Western Europe, where the relationship between citizens and infrastructures was—until recently—taken for granted in most cases.

Greece

Several leading scholars agree that the Greek debt crisis and its consequences constitute a radical version of the wider shift in the state's apparatuses across all of Europe (Habermas 2012; Giddens 2013; Bauman 2013; Sassen 2015; Zizek 2015). Ethnographic and other empirical research (see Dalakoglou et al. 2014) supports this argument. However, if Greece became the place used as the bad example of the euro-crisis, which had to see its entire polity and economy structurally adjusted and dissolved, it is also the place where people resisted and reacted to the adjustments in some of the most innovative ways, involving solidarity and the shaping of new forms of collaborative commons

(Dalakoglou and Angelopoulos 2017). So there are already explicit signs of the shifts in the forms of governance but most importantly in the social affordances of the key infrastructures (Dalakoglou and Kallianos, *forthcoming*).

There is a proliferation of mass grassroots practices and relationships that represent a reaction to the top-down contestation of the previous infrastructural paradigm, but at the same time they further challenge this paradigm and its stakeholders (state and market) from below. Such innovative social practices, which exhibit mass participation, comprise the first steps towards creating new realms of civil and social engagement that are directly relevant to key infrastructural functions (Dalakoglou and Kallianos, *forthcoming*). For instance, apart from the above-mentioned old airport of Athens, where a transport infrastructure has mutated into common urban greenspace, one can mention the following examples.

In response to the decrease in the Greek state's public health expenditures, 42 self-organized clinics and pharmacies have started operating across the country since 2010. In July 2015, each of the 16 newly founded clinics in Athens had an average of 2500 visitors per month (Solidarity4All 2015).

Concerning the administration of the water and sewage system in the second largest city of the country, Thessaloniki, a campaign against privatization evolved into a demand for common control of water provision networks. Apart from direct action tactics, which among others included worker disobedience (e.g. the refusal to cut off the water supply to households that could not afford the bills), WaterSOS saw the majority of the electorate of the city participating in a self-organized referendum (June 2014) that saw an explicit majority turn against the privatization of the municipal water company; a fact that resulted in a halt to the government's plans.

In the area of public broadcasting, the government shut down the state's television

channels and radio station in 2012 in order to reopen a more financially viable company. However, broadcasting facilities all around the country were occupied and have been functioning under the employees' self-management, with some of them operating under self-management right until the reinstatement of the previous public company in 2015.

As far as urban waste management is concerned, the first major political clash after the signing of the loan agreement between the Greek government and the 'Troika' concerned the government's decision on the administration of the capital's waste products in the area of Keratea. This is an ongoing battle that has been raging on multiple fronts. It is a process in which communities are claiming full participation in decision-making and where the cooperative and social economy sector comes up with successful proposed solutions.

The administration of the highway system is another contested area, as its privatization and the deceleration of private and public investment saw over 150,000 drivers refusing to pay tolls in 2010, thus forcing state authorities to implement special legislative measures.

Beyond the social movement domain, but with equally important social potentialities, lay the decentralized private micro-production of solar energy that skyrocketed during the crisis, with small units on rooftops and in open fields. Many thousands of Greek citizens have interests in this market, and with recent emergency changes in the legal framework that governs this energy micro-production, the attempts of producers to organize themselves in associations have drawn on some radical discourses challenging the prevalent model in this market.

Last but not least, and not necessarily directly related to the IG, but closely related with the newly emerging realm of socio-technological activity that goes beyond the state-market-third sector triptych is the expansion of social, solidarity and even sharing economies. So food

production and circulation systems were contested from the 45 self-organized ‘without middlemen’ networks. There are 45 such networks today with 26 in Athens. A survey of GSEVEE (small and middle businesses association) for 2012 showed that 22% of Greek households were eating food that comes from ‘without middlemen markets’. The average number of food producers participating per distribution was 23, and the average number of users per distribution was 655 (Solidarity4All 2015, 21). Beyond the markets, there are also the emergency self-organized food distribution networks. In September 2012, there were 12 such food-solidarity initiatives. The households supported in 2013 were 1987, while in July 2015 the number reached 5600 (Solidarity4All 2015, 19).

Within the same context one should talk about the wider alternative economy of grass-roots self-organization that grows based on all these networks, their inter-connections and interactions. Initial pilot research suggests that in 2012 there were circa 200 self-organized networks providing services and goods in Greece, while now it is estimated that these have doubled. There are over 110 social economy and self-organized initiatives (e.g. barter economy webs, time banks, alternative currency nets, etc.), while more than 300 workers’ or consumers’ co-ops are active. Among these co-ops some big ones like the chemical factory of VIOME, which has operated for some years now under workers’ control, and the second largest newspaper in the country during the 2000s which also functions under workers’ control (*Efimerida Syntakton*). Indeed, some of these new producers’ co-ops now also organize an international network of product distribution (exports) (Solidarity4All 2015, 22–23).

Conclusions: anthropology and infra-superstructures

Both state monopoly and public–private partnership paradigms in the governance

and development of infrastructures—in the case of Europe at least—are coming to an end as we knew them. The paradigm is shifting with a formidable effect on all spheres of everyday life. In several cases where new paradigms are potentially already emerging, we are witnessing them being based on novel social response and innovative socio-technological action. On the one hand, this action contests the existing paradigm—which is collapsing from within—and on the other it simultaneously produces new paradigms of infrastructural organization and provision. However, this is an ongoing process that needs to be understood as a project of thick ethnography from this early stage in order for us to be able to grasp the ongoing qualitative changes in the social relationships and produce effective new theoretical frameworks and analyses that will allow us to redefine the notions of infrastructure, but also notions of collective action within the new condition.

Anthropology touched upon infrastructures and their theoretical potentialities for the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Harris 1968; Godelier et al. 1978). Although the anthropological approach to infrastructures has always been distinct, these first infrastructural perspectives still drew upon the classical materialist social theory. As a result of this genealogy, infrastructures have commonly been considered, within social sciences, to be primarily connected to the material, economic and political spheres, rather than to the social one. This ‘anti-social’ understanding is reflected in ideas about infrastructures as stable and neutral technological systems leading to an everyday experienced normality that is so prevalent in the European infrastructural ideal. However, what the ethnographic approaches to infrastructures of recent years are showing is that if such ideas are ever relevant, they are mostly relevant in very few contexts, usually among the privileged global classes or in places with explicit infrastructural fetishism like post-socialist frameworks (Simone 2004; Edwards 2003, 188; Larkin 2013;

Dalakoglou and Harvey 2014). In places where people are experiencing disruptions in infrastructural networks, infrastructures are much more ‘visible’ and are perceived as social and much less neutral technological elements (Dalakoglou 2009; Chu 2014; Dalakoglou and Kallianos 2014).

At the other end, more recent work suggests that lack of reliability is always embedded in infrastructures (Dalakoglou 2009; Soppelsa 2009), yet it often just becomes more apparent during times of crisis. The fragility that characterizes infrastructures is also reflected when, for example, one studies ethnographically the people behind the production of infrastructures, such as engineers, as they almost always take the unreliability of infrastructures as a given element of the process (Harvey and Knox 2011). Indeed, one could argue that such practices could potentially simply be ‘black-boxing’ by experts and specialists in an antagonistic relationship between technology practitioners and politicians on the one side, and common people on the other (Star and Bowker 2006). However, these roles of expertise might be imaginary, as it is not a rare phenomenon for the experts to be absent from the actual production and daily function of infrastructure systems, which instead function thanks to the work of mundane low-rank, skilled or unskilled agents (Dalakoglou and Kallianos 2014, forthcoming).

All the above echoes a relatively banal but relevant statement: infrastructures are *socio-technological* elements that tend to embody ‘congealed social interests’ (Graham and Marvin 2001, 11; Graham 2010, 13). Although it is a cliché, if this statement becomes a parameter for the approach of IG, a unique window to a major theoretical paradigm shift is opened. Within this context—to put it schematically—soft and hard infrastructures do not produce socio-cultural superstructures, but socio-cultural superstructure produces infrastructural formations. So what are primarily social processes such as sharing, peer-to-peer

production, ideas of the commons and solidarity are becoming the new force behind the organization and function of novel forms of infrastructures. Nevertheless, things are complicated. Such an approach to an extent attempts to turn the classical materialist scheme on its head, and opens up a series of very crucial questions that need to be answered. For instance, what are the relationships between soft and hard infrastructures under current circumstances, and what can we potentially learn about covering the IG of hard infrastructures by the way that soft IG is covered? This also opens up to potentialities of a new radically different definition of infrastructures which needs to study and take into account at least two parameters which mutate infrastructure during the crisis in Europe: first, as realms of social and political contestation—with a focus on hard infrastructures within the context of crisis, economic meltdown and political implosion; and second, as sites of socio-technological innovation with the potentiality of articulating new and alternative governance and socio-economic networks focusing on grassroots structures and self-organized initiatives. For the first time in recent Western history, we are also witnessing the pragmatic and theoretical potential of infrastructures not only to be run by the people themselves, but to become a new type of socio-centric, socio-technological hybrid forums and agoras (Callon, Lascoume, and Barthes 2001).

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Notes

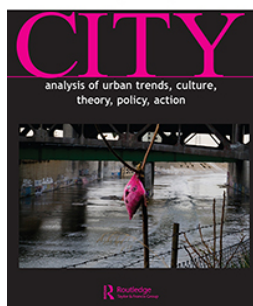
- 1 As I have argued elsewhere, infrastructures' development and the regime of border securitization of the EU are two closely related phenomena since they comprised two dominant spatialities of the years of Euro-boost (Dalakoglou 2016c).
- 2 Certainly the political economy of the collaborative commons is more complicated than that, see, for example, the three types of commons proposed by Kostakis and Bauwens (2014).

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Urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'

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Urban regeneration ‘from the bottom up’

Critique or co-optation? Notes from Milan, Italy

Chiara Rabbiosi 

In the last decade, urban studies scholars have been studying a wide variety of urban regeneration strategies formulated by social movements and civic networks. These initiatives range from physical interventions to social and cultural activities that also serve to appropriate urban space, according to an alternative logic to neo-liberal redevelopment plans. The aim of this paper is to participate in this debate by focusing on urban interventions that arise from self-organised local civic networks, to which I refer to as urban regeneration ‘from the bottom up’. The term includes proposals, projects or effective actions that are not yet framed by a public policy implemented by governments. Drawing on empirical research in the Navigli area of Milan, Italy, civic network initiatives are contrasted to municipal strategies of regeneration. By focusing on two different experiences I show how civic networks’ actions respond to neo-liberalism ambiguously: they challenge it, but at the same time they are consistent with its logic. In the conclusion, it is claimed that urban regeneration ‘from the bottom up’ suggests that the urban civic substratum of contemporary cities is still thriving. However, it is urgent that the contradictions these strategies entail are critically appropriated in order to develop a stronger answer to austerity urbanism.

Key words: local civic networks, urban regeneration, participation, austerity urbanism, Milan, Italy

Over the last three decades, researchers in the field of urban studies have debated urban regeneration by addressing a wide range of actions aimed at re-establishing the quality of urban life and exploring the relationships that connect the social and built structures of cities (for a review, see Leary and McCarthy 2013; Porter and Shaw 2009). Specifically, this paper focuses on the debate of urban regeneration, as it emerges from self-organised local civic networks to protect, regenerate and promote

urban commons (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Bialski et al. 2015). Urban regeneration arising ‘from the bottom up’ consists of heterogeneous initiatives based on the principles of progressive redistribution, ecological sustainability and social responsibility. These activities have not yet been turned into the ‘non-conflictual conceptions of creativity, sustainability, [and] liveability’ (Catterall 2012, 624) at the core of contemporary neo-liberal urban development, following the so-called creative turn (Florida 2002; Landry and Bianchini 1995).

The 'hidden potential' of local areas and neighbourhoods within cities has recently been the object of research demonstrating the ability of (apparently) 'interstitial' interventions to answer the needs of local communities in terms of urban regeneration (Moulaert et al. 2010; Unsworth et al. 2011). Examples of this kind can include the creation of collective urban gardening fields (as in Berlin's Prinzessinnengärten; Wulff 2014) or free playing fields that serve a wide category of temporary and less temporary populations (as in the case of cricket pitches in East Croydon, installed in a wasteland close to the UK Border Agency; Tonkiss 2013). Such initiatives have framed specific areas spatially, integrating public, private and non-profit motives. They have also sought to address environmental issues, arts and culture, and social sustainability; thereby overcoming the limitations within recent urban policy at a time of public expenditure cutbacks (Bialski et al. 2015; Unsworth et al. 2011). This is also the context for the restructuring of the governance of 'global north' cities, under the aegis of the austerity that followed the 2008 economic crisis (Peck 2012).

The paper discusses the process of urban regeneration led by self-organised civic networks, which emerged in response to the Milan city government's apparent commitment to regeneration 'from the bottom up'. How are self-organised local civic networks fighting against, responding to or reproducing neo-liberal urban policies? Is the entanglement between the proposals of civic networks and municipal strategies really able to provide cities with renewed forms of urban regeneration? To answer these questions, I sketch the profiles and outcomes of two self-organised civic networks active in the Navigli area of Milan during 2011: *Gruppo Verdi*¹ and *Laboratorio Urbano*. They serve as opposite comparative cases. The former, founded by a group of residents, has been able to realise and implement part of its urban regeneration project (a community garden), while the latter, dissimilar to a community-based movement, has disappeared.

The success of *Gruppo Verdi* can be seen as a successful story of urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'; representing a possible 'critique-through-practice' to contemporary austerity urbanism. At the same time, to succeed in its aims, this civic network has also adopted part of the neo-liberal ideology supporting austerity urbanism.

The changing meaning of participation in urban regeneration

Urban regeneration has been a significant topic over the past three decades and can be seen in different aspects of urban policy neo-liberalisation (Keil 2009). If very little space for local players and communities was allowed in the 1980s, the beginning of the 1990s instead made room for major real estate and infrastructure developers. A second term was characterised by the adoption of so-called participative policies from the second half of the 1990s onwards, introduced by interactive, collaborative and/or participatory planning approaches (Davoudi et al. 2008; Healey 1997; Krivý and Kaminer 2013). However, the generally restricted meaning of participation in urban policy, in terms of citizens' inclusion and empowerment, as well as the ideology and implications behind it, has been the object of widespread debate since the beginning of the 2000s (Jones 2003; Raco 2000; Souza 2006; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). Moving beyond institutionalised 'participatory' policies, the debate about urban regeneration has more recently focused on the initiatives of local self-organised civic networks (Bialski et al. 2015), critical of the failed pro-growth strategies of the pre-crisis decades (Unsworth et al. 2011). Still, these initiatives are ambiguous in so far as they often turn out to respond to 'good neoliberal citizenship by discursively appropriating neoliberal goals' (Changfoot 2007, 130) and may fail to challenge the larger structures that lead to uneven urban development (Hillbrandt and Richter 2015).

The economic downturn and associated financial cuts to municipal budgets in the cities of the 'global north' have also been interpreted as creating momentum to facilitate the processes of cities' neo-liberalisation, instead of reversing them (Peck 2012). With reduced budgets, city governments are much more likely to externalise interventions to private actors and inhabitants, in order to improve urban life. As Margit Mayer (2013) suggests, such principles as 'self-management, self-realisation and *all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity* have become not only easily feasible, but are also a generative force in today's neoliberalising cities [...], they have been usurped as essential ingredients of sub-local regeneration programs' (12; my emphasis). In the age of austerity urbanism (Bialski et al. 2015; Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013), the relationship between civic network initiatives and local governments is a good indicator of that 'roll-with-it neoliberalisation' (Keil 2009) characterised by the normalisation of practices and mind-sets of neo-liberalism in urban planning and everyday city life. This also involves civic activism (Hillbrandt and Richter 2015), which often uses discourses based on the neo-liberal ethos of self-sufficiency or economic growth (Changfoot 2007), and interstitial urban interventions that may be complicit with the logic of 'keeping vacant sites warm while development capital is cool' (Tonkiss 2013, 318).

Before discussing how this ambiguity is performed in Milan, I will briefly outline the city's political assets and strategies of regeneration during 2011–15.

Milan between austerity and political 'rebirth'

Italy was seriously concerned about the euro-zone crisis that developed after the Wall Street crash of 2008. Austerity urbanism also interested Milan (see Pollio 2016), despite it being a metropolitan area generally considered to be the most prominent

transport, industrial and financial hub in northern Italy. This time period also corresponded to a major change in the city's government. The elections of May 2011 saw the unexpected success of a left-wing candidate, Giuliano Pisapia, a lawyer involved in social movements and minority parties. A few months after the new left coalition was installed, Milan's General Development Plan for 2011–2016 (Comune di Milano 2011) was edited. The document revised the city as a 'common good' and proposed to reform the city government by creating an agenda that might be able 'to face the current crisis and feed a new project for Milan in a moment of decreasing resources'. Listening to civil society proposals was a key component by which the coalition, guided by Pisapia, endeavoured to be distinguished from the previous 20-plus years of centre-right administration that incentivised exploitative real estate redevelopment and annihilated participative projects (see Gonzalez 2009).

It is in this transitory context (which was full of expectations) that I was involved in a research project aimed at mapping the urban regeneration proposals that were arising from local civic networks in the Navigli area of Milan. The proponents were different in size, guiding principles and motivations. They also adopted different approaches towards getting their proposals recognised by the municipality or other local actors. This paper draws on that research project, conducted in 2011, and focuses on the period between 2011 and 2015. The research project, in a sense, has its roots in the 'roll-with-it' neo-liberalisation ambiguity that characterises both elite practices and bottom-linked movements (Keil 2009). The research project in fact was brought about in an academic applied research framework. This was performed with a private actor who represented a civic network and who also co-financed part of my salary as a post-doctoral researcher.² My job was to map 'the living realities' of actors (Senel 2014) who were pushing urban regeneration in the

Navigli area of Milan, in addition to helping our civic network partner transform its individual interest into a collective one. My activities also became of interest to the newly elected District Mayor³ who wanted to introduce new participatory policy tools in the area, and who supported me in becoming a 'linking' actor among the relevant active civic networks. Even though my own performance of research was at some distance from that associating activism in academia and grass-roots involvement (Chatterton, Fuller, and Routledge 2007), it often approached such framework.

In 2011, I searched for, and followed, the existent organisations that were willing to contribute to the urban regeneration of the area between the two canals. Materials about the proposals of civic networks were collected; these ranged from feasibility plans to communication leaflets. Key persons at each organisation were interviewed,⁴ and I attended most of their public initiatives. Occasionally I also attended their private meetings.

The discursive and practical routes undertaken to realise proposals were observed in a range of settings (neighbourhood fairs or official presentations to municipal representatives), culminating, as far as the research was concerned, in a round table discussion that I co-organised on 3 November 2011 with the active support of the District Council. This event was attended by over a hundred individual citizens who came to listen and propose their visions as to how the area should be changed. Using their own documentation and activities to date as a starting point, I analysed a variety of patterns of urban regeneration proposed by civic networks arising from outside the framework of a public policy. I then questioned how much 'room' was allowed by the city government for the different proposals to be realised. Finally, I focused on the implications of the adoption or co-optation of self-organised local civic network projects. Based on these research performances, the following section will offer a snapshot of

the area as a living laboratory for urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'.

Making space for urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'? A snapshot of the Navigli area, 2011

Stretching south-west from its most northerly point, close to the city centre towards the urban fringes, the area between the two urban canals, Naviglio Grande and Naviglio Pavese (Figure 1), has a strong rural background that was largely destroyed during the Fordist boom of the 1960s and 1970s. The first phase of destruction was undertaken in order to make room for factories and a variety of housing estates (from the 1950s onwards), and a later phase saw the creation of service sector buildings and more housing (1990s onwards). Finally, the northern part of the area has rapidly become very attractive to businesses connected with the cultural-cognitive economy that started relocating into obsolete industrial or manufacturing buildings in the early 2000s (Bovone, Mazzette, and Rovati 2005). By contrast, the southern part of the area continues to combine popular neighbourhoods poor in services.

In 2011 and 2012, an abundance of projects were proposed by local self-organised civic networks to regenerate the area between the two canals (see Table 1). These proposals were encouraged by the climate of transition, introduced both by the new City Council and the prospect of the Universal Exhibition that would have been held in Milan during 2015.⁵ Within the city limits it was thought that this major event would have been of greater interest to this part of Milan than to other areas. At that time, it was possible to identify a variety of organisations that were partnering in order to stimulate a process of urban regeneration outside the realm of institutionalised policy tools. Including a variety of community-based organisations (i.e. the neighbourhood radio station), cultural associations, residents' associations and

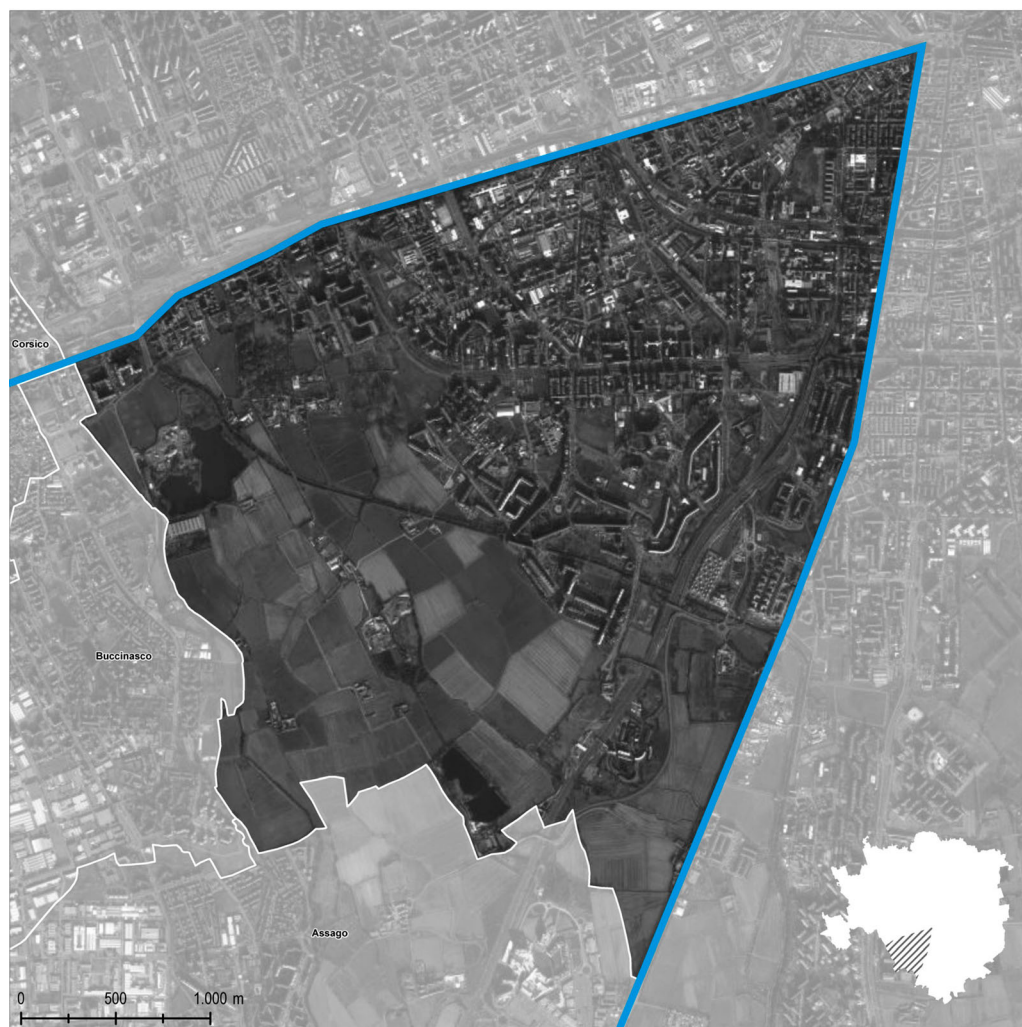


Figure 1 The researched area between the Naviglio Grande and Naviglio Pavese canals in Milan, Italy.

businesses with social commitments, local civic networks were mainly oriented towards defending and improving the quality of open spaces and green areas, or creating the necessary infrastructure to connect different parts of the Navigli area via walking or cycle paths. Physical interventions were also accompanied (although only to a minor extent) by the possibility of enhancing health and community services, or revitalising local production and distribution. Cultural activities involving both artists, residents and other populations dealing with the area were proposed as a means to facilitate

cultural expression and identity formation within the area. 'Participation', 'synergy', 'bond-creating' and 'place-making' emerged as key terms for many civic networks in the discussion on fostering urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'. However, the terms were used to describe very different kinds of actions along a formal continuum between institutional participation and community-based initiatives.

I will now turn to examine the case of two of the most active civic networks. They have been chosen for their diverse profiles and outcomes. One, *Gruppo Verdi*,

Table 1 Project proposals from civic networks, 2011–12

Organisation Type Active since	Urban regeneration project proposals State of advancement
Fiumi Milanesi <i>Civic network whose members are partially close to the Democrats party</i> 2006	Public urban park along the canals connecting the municipal area with the outskirts <i>Advanced project proposal</i>
Parco Metropolitano <i>Local residents and farmers</i> 2008	Cultural and environmental project aimed at revitalising the urban paddy fields. This includes food education labs, thematic itineraries in the park aimed at light infrastructure to access the park and connect to the canal <i>Advanced project proposal</i>
Campi di Via Martini <i>Private vegetable garden and its users</i> 2000	Enhancement of community urban gardens <i>Advanced project proposal</i>
Associazione Amici dell'acqua <i>Cultural association</i> 1985	Hydraulic intervention in the Darsena area <i>Advanced project proposal</i>
Gruppo Sport sui Navigli <i>Local sport business</i> 2007	Sport, tourism and cultural promotion <i>Proposal</i>
Porto Ribelle <i>Local residents and urban environmentalists</i> 2009	Wildlife public urban island <i>Advanced project proposal</i>
Laboratorio urbano <i>Local businesses (SME) network, driven by an architecture company located in the area</i> 2008	Local urban park requalification; the local underground station requalification <i>Proposal</i>
Gruppo Verdi <i>Residents</i> 2010	Environmental requalification of the areas between Naviglio Grande and the railway; introduction of a system of barges to connect the two sides of the Naviglio Grande; environmental requalification of the Olona filling channel <i>Advanced project proposal</i>
Il quartiere per Milano, Cantiere Ticinese <i>Civic network and architects-residents</i> 2011	Requalification of micro-areas and implementation of connectivity in public areas <i>Project proposal</i>
Fatto qui <i>A sum of cultural agencies, charities and residents</i> 2011	Social marketing <i>Existing project</i>

Note: All the names of the civic networks have been changed.

Source: Morandi and Rabbiosi (2012); www.cives.partecipami.it/infodiscs/index/3 (last update 9 July 2012; last accessed 17 September 2014); personal enquiry.

represents a residents' network, and the second, *Laboratorio Urbano*, was primarily composed, but not limited to, different kinds of businesses located in the area. While different, these two civic networks shared a similarity as they were mainly composed of the middle-class components of the Navigli area. However, their respective manifestos were addressing the city in

its social and economic diversity and not the specificity their profile represented. Today *Gruppo Verdi* has realised part of its project(s), a community garden. On the other hand, after it produced plans for investing in obsolete space laying in abandonment in 2010–11, *Laboratorio Urbano* slowly disappeared without giving shape to its project(s).

Gruppo Verdi was established in 2010 as a residents' civic network to re-appropriate wastelands in the area that often turned into unofficial garbage dumps. *Gruppo Verdi*'s members began cleaning them up and reclaiming the direct management of one limited allotment. Community involvement was not limited to the civic network's founder members. Participation was incentivised through different activities (cleaning up, social events). In addition to this, by using the skills of some of its members, *Gruppo Verdi* prepared a feasibility study for installing a system of public transport barges in the canals, in order to overcome the problem of the limited number of bridges. Water is indeed a problematic issue in the Navigli area, one that extends beyond the canals to include a filling channel, the Scolmatore Olona, which runs partly in the open air (Figure 2). The filling channel forms a barrier, as its banks are neglected. Besides *Gruppo Verdi*, a variety of other civic networks work to ensure better maintenance of the canals and of the filling channel. While fostering its own projects, *Gruppo Verdi* also tightened connections with other networks involved in active citizenship, with the aim of enhancing the area by emphasising the social resources already available locally and reinforcing community involvement.

*Laboratorio Urbano*⁶ was founded by a newly arrived architectural and engineering company in late 2008; composed of some two dozen other local businesses of different sizes. In a way, the network represented the 'creative' cluster that had recently located in the area. Among this network's proposals was a major project to reconnect the Navigli area with the rest of the city through the redevelopment of an underground station at the core of the neighbourhood. Another project involved recovering a green allotment with reclaimed soil and some furniture to adjoin it to an already existing urban park.

In comparison with *Gruppo Verdi*, *Laboratorio Urbano*'s actions were less rooted in

everyday practice and community involvement. Both networks wanted to regenerate wasteland as part of their aims. But, in the case of *Laboratorio Urbano*, the final output would not have been a community garden, but simply an open infrastructured space. With this aim, the network started a feasibility plan, but this was accompanied only by increased networking with the representatives of other civic networks, or even major private and public actors. Only in one case, during 2011, *Laboratorio Urbano* took part in a popular neighbourhood festival, presenting its projects and asking the audience (made up primarily of residents) to comment and implement them.

For both *Gruppo Verdi* and *Laboratorio Urbano*, as with the majority of the networks in the Navigli area, urban regeneration actions focused on the reduction of physical obstacles within the area. However, for *Gruppo Verdi*, what divided their area from the rest of the city was also intangible and to regenerate it meant filling the gaps in cultural and social deprivation paths through daily activities involving the neighbourhoods' residents. Meanwhile, for *Laboratorio Urbano*, this kind of regeneration would have followed a simple physical intervention.

Starting from different premises, *Gruppo Verdi* and *Laboratorio Urbano* brought about different outcomes. In the Navigli area, *Gruppo Verdi* 'found that there are fragments of land that are theoretically everybody's land but that are actually no one's [...] What we say is, let's try to find the tools to re-appropriate these lands through timely actions.'⁷ As already mentioned, this initial engagement turned into a community garden. The City of Milan recognised the garden in 2013 and granted its management to *Gruppo Verdi* for a starting period of three years (currently under renewal). In the garden a variety of leisure activities are performed and maintained by the network (Figure 3). Throughout this process, *Gruppo Verdi* reinforced its relationship with the municipality: it was eager, for



Figure 2 The filling channel Scolmatore Olona in one of the poorest part of the Navigli area. Local civic networks have been asking for the regeneration of its banks.

instance, to take part in the participatory budgeting that was provisionally introduced in the area by the Milanese government in 2015.

Working from within, and assuming the amount of time that institutionalised urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' might take (see also Changfoot 2007), *Gruppo*



Figure 3 *Gruppo Verdi's* proposal to re-appropriate a wasteland garden in 2011 turned into a community garden by 2015.

Verdi was able to give shape and continuity to its action. *Laboratorio Urbano* was the farthest from social activism among all the networks analysed in 2011.

'Laboratorio Urbano is born under the initiative of an entrepreneur [...] and we were inspired by the UK model of the Business Improvement Districts [...] but then we realised that here the situation is very complex. After the initial spontaneous enthusiasm, we got frustrated by the difficulty to make understanding our project to other businesses [located, as are we, in the area].'⁸

Indeed, *Laboratorio Urbano* was more oriented towards partnering with businesses, or even real estate developers in the area, while *Gruppo Verdi* was more keen to partner with community-based networks. *Laboratorio Urbano* was not able to give shape and continuity to its action; it also lost the support of many of its original followers and gradually withdrew from urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'.

Urban regeneration 'from the bottom up': critique or co-optation?

What has been described so far can be considered as a way of responding to austerity urbanism by self-organised civic networks' initiatives. The cost of producing feasibility plans or cleaning up wastelands was sustained through their own direct actions 'from the bottom up', outside a policy scheme. In doing so, *Laboratorio Urbano* and *Gruppo Verdi* proposed and generated 'micro-scale' interventions, responding to a 'macro-scale' disinvestment in connecting the social and built structures of cities finalised to improve the quality of life of its citizens.

Most of the networks mentioned in this paper had originally aimed to turn their bottom-up action into an institutionalised one. Such an opportunity arose in 2012, when the new District Mayor of the area proposed that both the central City Council and local stakeholders (civic networks included)

should take part in a forum then known as either the *Milano EXPO2015 Zona 6* or *Via d'Acqua EXPO 2015*, which was designed with a common vision for both the local government and Milan's citizens. This was a prelude to the major event that the city would host four years later. The Forum Chart⁹ pinpointed three main aims: the promotion of extended and diffused connections of the area from the margins of the city to the city centre; the individuation of new public spaces within the city margins, especially where divisions were currently present; and the promotion of private, coherent interventions in obsolete or underused spaces. The intention was to create an intermediate occasion for debating projects that came 'from the bottom up', such as those presented here. Strategies for mending physical as well as social divides were lacking in the city, as were paths towards participatory forms of urban regeneration, framed by at least a few criteria of social, environmental, economic and institutional sustainability. Indeed, 'recognis[ing] untapped areas of potential by challenging and going beyond the business-as-usual urban policy orthodoxy, and how to enable communities to realise this potential to build their own resilience strategies and improve well-being' (Unsworth et al. 2011, 183) is not only of interest to social movements or local civic networks. It is also (and more often) important to institutional actors who might consider strategies to approve bottom-up proposals as a way to institutionally respond to the shift towards austerity urbanism (Peck 2012). There is also scope for exploitative business interests that might indirectly take advantage of the urban regeneration provided by grass-roots initiatives. This is undertaken through turning it to their own advantage by first externalising actions to increase the quality of urban life on the back of civic networks, and then making a profit out of it as soon as the 'business-as-usual' economy returns (Tonkiss 2013).

The participatory forum for the Navigli area was officially discussed at a public



Figure 4 The new cycle path along the Naviglio Grande can be considered one of the few proposals of the civic networks that was partly taken on board by institutions and financed by a number of private partners.

meeting held at the end of 2012,¹⁰ but it never translated into a real, permanent, policy tool; nor were most of the projects proposed 'from the bottom up' realised.

However, some of the proposals of the civic networks were partly taken on board as the Municipality intervened to redevelop some parts of the area, such as a new cycle path connecting the different green areas between the two canals (Figure 4).

Nevertheless, what is worth mentioning here is that during the origins of this process there was a notable investment on the part of civic networks in defining certain problematic issues in the Navigli area. Civic networks have actively engaged in proposing how to face them. In order to do that, they turned their action towards self-management and self-sufficiency (Mayer 2013). Self-sufficiency is not immanently neo-liberal, but it has been appropriated by neo-liberalism as a mantra to reproduce itself. Many civic networks rely on this same notion, without being able to reflect this appropriation. In this sense, their action is co-opted by neo-liberal policies. In

the two cases outlined, this co-optation is very subtle. The community garden managed by *Gruppo Verdi* is possibly the only original project effectively realised that is still in the hands of the proponent civic network. In order to achieve this result, the civic network has worked in two directions: on the one hand, by self-providing interventions for making it real through everyday practice; on the other, by coming to terms with the municipality. On the contrary, the most business-rooted civic network, *Laboratorio Urbano*, decided not to continue investing in bottom-up urban regeneration. Responding to the logic of economic 'return on investment', *Laboratorio Urbano* evaluated that the game was not worth playing.

Conclusion

Some of the possible risks of urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' are that the outcomes are then appropriated by actors not interested in achieving socio-spatial transformation answering the needs of local

communities, or by the municipality in order to seize upon the positive press for itself. Thus, they claim that citizens' voices have been received and freedom of choosing the city's future has been allowed to them. Literature discussing austerity urbanism (Mayer 2013; Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013) has warned of the risk of instrumentalisation of the economic crises. Following Peck (2012), public budget cutbacks turn into a good excuse for institutional actors to do 'less with less', a turn that is consistent with a particular intensification of neo-liberal restructuring strategies. In line with the recent account of Pollio (2016), I suggest looking at the other side of the coin, to consider the 'more with less' that can be done in this context. In the above-mentioned case, the 'more' is represented in the attempt of the Milanese government to support some projects that had been proposed outside pre-existent policy tools. Secondly, the 'less' that can descend from the limited ability of the municipality to implement its policies towards urban regeneration 'from the bottom up', doesn't erase the 'more' contained in 'backstage' proposals from self-organised civic networks. Namely, the learning process civic networks had to go through to engage with larger collective interests; the personal investment performed by their members to structure their proposal; and, as in the case of *Gruppo Verdi*, the effort to bring it to life through everyday practice.

Local civic networks have been able to stimulate participatory, albeit partial, processes within themselves and/or from the part of the city government. This 'more' is evidently ambiguous since it often includes the assumption of rhetoric and behaviours of self-sufficiency and self-reliance consistent with neo-liberalism; thus participating to its normalisation (Keil 2009). There is the risk that the critique urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' brings to austerity urbanism eventually dissolves in it. Local civic networks' agency is messy, experimental and embedded in micro-tactics, similar to what happens for strictly political, grass-roots

initiatives developing alternatives to capitalism (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). It is necessary to recognise on the one hand the agentic role of civic networks in providing effective strategies of urban regeneration. However, it is of greater urgency to unveil the ways through which urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' is simultaneously against and within the neo-liberal present. As long as all the parties involved with it do not recognise this—critically appropriating this contradiction—their action will result in only a partial alternative to austerity urbanism.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- 1 All the names of the civic networks have been changed.
- 2 During that year, I felt constantly challenged to question my research partner and my own research practices. I struggled to find a place for myself in the research; as a Milanese citizen; as a researcher. I also wanted to maintain a commitment to my own values and political views, and equally, I had to respond to my role as an employee. I was somehow the object and the subject of different layers of 'roll-with-it' neo-liberal governmentality.
- 3 The area of the enquiry does not correspond exactly to a City District. Here we refer to the district that comprises it predominantly.
- 4 Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were undertaken in 2011. In 2015, while revisions of this paper were made, I was able to conduct three follow-up interviews.
- 5 Under the slogan *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*, this massive event was thought to embrace the

broad issue of sustainability and extend its influence and infrastructural intervention throughout the city, well beyond the Expo site (Di Vita 2014). The event—a classical top-down urban regeneration intervention—was the object of a variety of objections that I cannot address in this limited context.

- 6 *Laboratorio Urbano* was the research project partner mentioned in the previous paragraph.
- 7 Round table 'Rigenerazione urbana tra Naviglio grande e Naviglio pavese. Attori locali a confronto' (Urban Regeneration between the Naviglio grande and the Naviglio pavese. A Debate among Local Actors), Milan, Italy, 3 November 2011.
- 8 Round table 'Rigenerazione urbana tra Naviglio grande e Naviglio pavese. Attori locali a confronto' (Urban Regeneration between the Naviglio grande and the Naviglio pavese. A Debate among Local Actors), Milan, Italy, 3 November 2011.
- 9 Comune di Milano, *Forum Milano Expo 2015 Zona 6*, 2012. Non-recoverable, personal communication.
- 10 See http://www.arcipelagomilano.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/programma_navigli.pdf (last accessed 17 September 2014).

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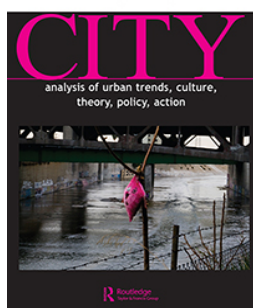
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***The Wire* as seen from France**

Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Amélie Flamand

*This paper analyses the reception of the American TV series *The Wire* in the French context as part of a long, transatlantic conversation rooted in two histories and two social and political ‘models’. It focuses on educated audiences as well as on youth living in poor neighbourhoods; it also attempts to gauge the audiovisual references used by French viewers of the series. It shows how the series fuels a socially stratified sociological imaginary but also directly tackles ethno-racial issues that are still largely unaddressed in French debates.*

Key words: TV series, transatlantic circulation, sociological imagination, ghetto, segregation

1. Introduction

A lot has already been written about the HBO-produced TV series *The Wire*, broadcast in the USA from 2002 to 2008. The show was co-directed by former *Baltimore Sun* journalist, David Simon, and Ed Burns, a former police officer and teacher. Through its detailed depiction of ghettoised neighbourhoods in the East Coast city of Baltimore, *The Wire* provides a radical critique of American society. The series received some 50 nominations and won 15 prestigious awards.¹ *The Wire* is also probably the series that has been most closely analysed by the social sciences and it has generated an unprecedented amount of interest in academia, in fields as diverse as cultural studies, sociology, film studies and urban studies. It has been the focus of no fewer than seven collective works and six special issues in scientific journals.² In France, two collective works have been published on the subject.³

Researchers’ interest in the economic and aesthetic aspects of TV series is nothing new in the fields of philosophy, film studies or cultural studies, where other series before

The Wire were the focus of academic research.⁴ It is in this tradition that a group of authors has highlighted the originality of *The Wire*’s construction, writing style and visual plan and analysed its economic model. Hamilton Carroll (2012) has demonstrated that while the series embodies a strong critique of neo-liberalism and its social consequences, it is itself a product of the culture industry’s shift towards neo-liberalism. And yet beyond its novel form, *The Wire*’s success is likely tied to its powerful underlying argument—the failure of American society and its social and economic system—and to its clever blurring of fiction and reality. It was with this in mind that sociologist Ruth Penfold-Mounce and her colleagues coined the expression ‘social science fiction’, a term subsequently used in a lot of research. For them, *The Wire* was ‘the premier exemplar that we currently possess of the sociological imagination as popular culture’ (Penfold-Mounce, Beer, and Burrows 2011, 155). And yet it is precisely this vision of the social world—seen by some as ‘cynical’—that is controversial (Atlas and Dreier 2008; Chaddha, Wilson, and Venkatesh 2008). *The Wire* is accused of exaggeration and dashing hopes and

cause for resistance by overlooking ordinary people and community mobilisation (Atlas and Dreier 2008). What then is the series' political impact? After all, fiction helps produce the world as much as it describes it: 'Fiction is not a beautiful adventure or a nasty lie that is opposed to reality or that we wish to depict as such. *Fingere* means to forge not to feint' (Rancière 2001, 202). While commending the power of its realism, philosopher Fredric Jameson (2010) has pointed up the show's utopian side which is capable of nurturing the sociological imagination of spectators, whether in terms of legalising drugs (season 3), a teacher's attempt to abolish school exams (season 4) or even the desperate need to save Baltimore Port from being shut down by globalisation (season 2).

We would like to pursue this discussion here by focusing on how *The Wire* was received in France. Following Scranton's thinking, 'The question we must ask is not whether the story is true but what does the story mean?'⁵ Following in the steps of the sociologist Howard Becker, we will also ask 'what does the story mean?' in a specific social context, for different publics and in a TV production landscape. Becker (2007) denies that the social sciences are the only sciences that speak about society; they do not have a monopoly on the production of knowledge or on creating representations of the world. Fiction, theatre, film and photography also offer stimulating interpretations of reality, but this does not mean that only artistic works do this, or that they can be reduced to a sociological analysis. He goes on to add that 'representations exist fully only when someone is using them, reading or viewing or listening and thus completing the communication by interpreting the results and constructing for themselves a reality out of what the maker showed them' (25). And 'the users of representations play a critical role. No matter what the makers of representations do, if the users don't do their part, the story doesn't get told as the story the makers intended' (286).

It is on this work, that is, how *The Wire* was received in the French context, that we wish to focus here.

This is influenced by the channels through which the series was broadcast, by the broader ideological and cinematographic viewer context and by the imagination and life experience of the viewers. The context in which it was received in France has been marked by a very different urban and social history from that of American cities. However, it has also been forged by the circulation of cultural goods and ideas on an international scale, especially between the USA and France.

The way in which *The Wire* was received in France is also bound up with the popular imaginary of the American city. In America, Jean Baudrillard (1989, 56) claims

'The American City seems to have stepped right out of the movies ... To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards towards the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city.'⁶

This approach is an extension of his research into simulation and simulacrum. The philosopher contends that in the consumer and image-obsessed society, the simulation precedes the real and possesses a production value; the copy may sometimes replace the original and the 'simulacrum' does not need reality (Baudrillard 1985). However, while *The Wire* may be seen as a hyper-realistic fiction, this fiction functions here simultaneously in the to-ing and fro-ing and dialogue with reality and in relation to the imaginary that underpins the American ghetto and the American city in general.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy (1993) develops the idea of a geographic, cultural and commercial space, comprising the triangular relationships between the Americas, Africa and Europe in which new black cultures were forged. By stressing the influence of the circulation of people, ideas and music within the 'black Atlantic' as well as the meeting of different realities, he highlights

the resulting hybridisation or reinterpretation of the social world. In particular, he shows how ‘eminent black people’ travelling to Europe helped change their perception of America and racial domination. We would like to ‘turn the perspective around’ to analyse how images coming from the USA can help to transform (or not) the way in which French viewers perceive distressed neighbourhoods and ethnic minorities, not just in the USA but in France as well. One of the characters in the very first episode of *The Wire* says, ‘This is America’; but which America exactly and which ghetto comes to mind from a French perspective? What does *The Wire*’s reception in France say about representations of the American ghetto on the other side of the Atlantic? And, conversely, what does this view say about representations of underprivileged French neighbourhoods?

Although Gilroy contends that the ‘black Atlantic’ came to an end in 1981 with the death of Bob Marley and the end of an Ethiopian voice, and the move towards Islam (2007), circulation still exists in both the musical and research spheres. Thus, in a context of globalisation, where local neighbourhoods are increasingly linked, the ghetto has become an object of academic research, as well as a focus in literature, music and audiovisual production as the transnational metaphor for immobility and ‘dead-ended-ness’ resulting from poverty, race and territories—and *The Wire* has served to reinforce this. The Bronx occupies a central place in the imaginary consciousness of young French people from working-class neighbourhoods, especially those from the visible minorities. Images of the Bronx have become symbols of ghettos and the urban outskirts in a globalised world. To paraphrase Baudrillard, we could contend that ‘The ghetto no longer precedes its image, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the image that precedes the ghetto—precession of simulacra—that engenders the ghetto’ (‘The Precession of Simulacra’).

Our analysis focuses on a number of perspectives. We have concentrated on educated

audiences because this group of people may have been primarily targeted by the series both in the way that it is broadcast and packaged. It has featured on university courses and in academic and political debates on distressed areas.

However, we have also focused on youth living in poor neighbourhoods because the series was a hit with this section of the public as well. We tried to analyse whether this success was achieved through the same processes as for better educated audiences and what the effects were on representations of youths with first-hand experience of social exclusion and racism. Producing images means exercising power in how to represent the world: ‘we know that stereotypical representations can be used by those in power to reinforce existing inequalities, even to envision and create ever harsher new realities’ (Wyly 2010, 507). But, staying with Wyly, the question of what the actors do with these images remains?

Finally, to understand the manner in which *The Wire* was received in France, we have attempted to gauge the audiovisual references used by French viewers of the series. By developing these three angles of analysis, we attempt to reconcile academic and media representations with those of various publics because it is also within such exchanges that each one is forged.

Our research draws on several analytical corpora: academic and media coverage of the series in France; rap lyrics that refer to the series and helped introduce it to a wider public; a series of discussions conducted with incarcerated youth in the juvenile offenders’ wing of Nanterre prison in the Paris region; and French TV shows that focus on poor neighbourhoods.

1.1. *When the media and academia focus on the American ghetto*

Although the series was broadcast in France quite late on restricted-view (cable) channels and in French, it still proved a big hit

among intellectuals and in cinematographic and TV circles. A plethora of critiques, interviews with the directors and radio programmes began to appear in 2011/12 and all of David Simon's Paris conferences were packed out. In 2011, the first French-language book on the series quickly went out of print (Burdeau and Vieillescazes 2011). This was an attempt by a group of writers from diverse backgrounds (philosophy, literature, film critics) to analyse the series by combining a formal approach with social and political analyses over the course of five chapters corresponding to the five different seasons of the series.

We participated by co-organising several seminars and a conference on the series at Université Paris Ouest.⁷ These initiatives were a big success: they attracted a large and diverse audience that extended far beyond the usual student and researcher publics and generated an unusual amount of media coverage. Several TV stations came to film; we were interviewed on a number of radio programmes, including certain national stations with a very wide reach; daily newspapers, as well as weekly and monthly publications also reported on the initiative.⁸ This success was renewed when the conference proceedings were published (Bacqué et al. 2014).⁹ Other universities subsequently organised seminars and conferences on the series; and, like in the USA, the show was included on certain course programmes. So why was the series such a big hit in the media and in academia?

French research into the production of TV series is nothing new, even if this media was long considered 'low-brow' as it was not part of 'legitimate culture' as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1979). There is now an established research field interested in the language of TV series, but *The Wire*'s appeal extends beyond this group and engages with the social sciences more broadly, and notably with urban studies and political sociology. Like their American and British peers, French researchers are interested in the systemic analysis proposed by

The Wire and in the power of fiction to talk about society (Atkinson and Beer 2010). An additional question is also of interest to French urban sociology, namely, to what extent do the descriptions offered by *The Wire* and the underlying analyses shed light on the French context?

References to the USA are common in French political and scientific debate, a long-standing tradition rooted in the country's Tocquevillian heritage. This occurs in contrasting ways, however. On the one hand, structural differences are pointed up based on differences in the historical construction of the French and American states which oppose two national contexts; this perspective tends to stoke the myth of French or American exceptionalism (Lipset 1996; Schuck and Wilson 2008). On the other hand, the USA is presented as an advanced laboratory for urban and social transformation able to identify trends still nascent in France and to predict the future, regardless of whether this laboratory is viewed as a model or a 'nightmare' (Jacquier 1992). Theories of the neo-liberal city which describe a set of global processes that marginalise, segment and polarise tend to point towards a process of transnational homogenisation (Sassen 2001; Brenner 2004). The internationalisation of the social sciences, the predominance of English-language scientific journals in the international research landscape, the transfer of concepts and categories from one country to another and from one language to another which simultaneously import ways of conceptualising and understanding the world are all part of this homogenising vision. Thus, just as the notion of gentrification became *THE* category for interpreting the very diverse processes of social transformation benefiting the middle and upper classes, the ghetto has become *THE* symbol of ethno-racial urban segregation. But is ghetto vocabulary appropriate for analysing poor French neighbourhoods, which are themselves often reduced to *banlieue* neighbourhoods, relegated to the urban outskirts?

While French researchers agree on the extent of socio-spatial polarisation in cities, the pauperisation of certain low-income neighbourhoods coupled with a major concentration of households of foreign origin and major inequalities in terms of access to public services, the importance of the black economy and increasing social tensions, references to the ghetto are still a topic of heated debate. Although some writers contend that the ghetto has become a reality in certain French neighbourhoods (Lapeyronnie 2008), others stress the differences that still set these French areas apart from their American counterparts (Rey 1996; Vieillard-Baron 1996). Loïc Wacquant (2007) in particular denounces the amalgam of black American ghettos and very poor neighbourhoods in France as contrary to all historical and sociological sense. He contends that, in addition to differences of scale, public policy management in these areas differs considerably on both sides of the Atlantic: in most poor French neighbourhoods, public services—albeit insufficient—still constitute a government and institutional presence and a social infrastructure that is virtually non-existent in black ghettos in the USA. Wacquant also stresses the diversity of the ethnic composition of French neighbourhoods vis-à-vis the predominance of Afro-Americans in American ghettos and contends that the situation in distressed French neighbourhoods is driven primarily by class whereas that of American neighbourhoods is underpinned mainly by race. However, the risk inherent in this analysis is that it minimises the reality of racialisation and ethnicisation processes in France borne out by recent youth mobilisation in French *banlieues*. Moreover, as Sylvie Tissot (2007, 367) has demonstrated, ‘if we speak about non-whites, homogeneity becomes a striking feature of the *banlieues*’.

The Wire reactivated these debates based on its depiction of Baltimore’s ghettoised neighbourhoods and the public policies at work there. In this discussion, America is once again depicted as a counter-model

which serves to either laud the French situation (there are still public services and State involvement) or foreshadow what is soon to come.

Like their American colleagues, French intellectuals see *The Wire* as a critique of neo-liberalism and of the withdrawal/poorly adapted nature of institutions—all of which strike a chord in France. A performance-based and profit-driven culture—whose absurdities are perfectly underscored in the series’ portrayal of education and policing practices—is one of the central tenets of New Public Management practices imposed on services in France over the past decade. But it is the issue of race, still relatively taboo in French debate, although it has recently been addressed by a body of research (Fassin and Fassin 2006; Ndiaye 2008), that emerges as one of the most salient topics of the discussion. Fredric Jameson (2010) has described the series as ‘post-racial’ since not only are there a lot of black actors, but their roles cover the entire range of social statuses and are not confined to situations of dominance:

‘here there is no longer any such thing as “black” people and by the same token no such thing as black political or social solidarity. These former “black people” are now in the police; they can be criminals or prison inmates, educators, mayors and politicians.’
(370)

In the French context, this racialised image reflects a set of questions raised in the post-colonial era and touches on issues that French society still refuses to address. It raises questions of its relationships with its immigrant population or people of colour, the real or supposed ghettoisation of certain territories and the alleged rise in insecurity. The series also helps reframe important social and political questions precisely according to the different sociological projections at work. It is as though the show allows middle and upper-class audiences to discover the poor neighbourhoods of large French cities (from which they are often socially

and geographically far removed) by looking through a North American lens. They can relate to this depiction of the ghetto because it directly probes different institutions with which they are engaged as users or professionals, in the areas of education, the law, the police, the media or politics.

Moreover, as in the UK, the series has emerged in political debate. During a speech, the Mayor of Sevrans, one of the poorest Parisian *banlieues*, compared his town to the ghetto portrayed in *The Wire*. He saw the same violence, drug problems and excluded social housing projects. He used the occasion to appeal for additional resources and to argue in favour of decriminalising cannabis, citing the 'Hamsterdam' experiment where a police officer led an initiative to create a zone in which drugs could be openly sold in Baltimore, thus pacifying the city's other neighbourhoods.¹⁰ Here fiction is used to bolster reality in a political storytelling initiative (Salmon 2008). Fiction becomes both argument and model for transforming reality. Conversely, reality appeared to extend the realm of fiction during the spring 2015 Baltimore Riots and indeed we witness resident mobilisation at work in the sixth season of *The Wire*. The Community organisations whose absence had been used to criticise the directors of the series (Atlas and Dreier 2008) emerged to structure the protest movement. The creation of Black Lives Matters in the wake of the Ferguson and Baltimore riots constitutes a more optimistic epilogue. Moreover, French media commentary on these events made frequent reference to the TV series. As Baudrillard suggests, this blurs the distinction between the image and what it represents or simulates to such an extent that simulation ends up preceding and helping to transform reality.

1.2. Rap music as a vector for circulating or importing the figure of the ghetto

Several authors have argued that *The Wire* was aimed at an educated audience, 'equally

at home in the [same] cinematic socio-spatial imaginary as the show's writers' (Parker 2010, 494). *The Wire* is presented as a difficult series. Its very structure, which carefully crafts a tableau over the five seasons, the number and complexity of characters, and the slow rhythm of the early episodes may indeed make it less accessible. Several people interviewed from different socio-economic groups mentioned how hard it was initially to get into the series. And yet the popularity of the series in France extended well beyond the intellectual sphere that initially lauded it and *The Wire* even became a cultural reference amongst some youths from underprivileged neighbourhoods. We assessed this phenomenon during discussions about the series organised with young people living in poor neighbourhoods, and more particularly with a group of youths incarcerated in the juvenile offenders' wing of Nanterre prison. Several young people were familiar with the series before we met and others had already seen or heard of parts of it.

One way in which youths become aware of *The Wire* was undoubtedly through its ties with American as well as French rap music. Several of the show's actors made guest appearances in videos, like Wood Harris who played Avon Barksdale, one of the main drug dealers and the drug kingpin for a time in the series, and Lance Reddick who played police officer Cedric Daniels. The actor Idriss Elba—aka Stringer Bell, the second in command in the 'Barksdale clan'—had already been rapping under the name DJ Big Driis or Big Driis the Londoner; Felicia 'Snoop' Pearson, who played herself as a young female gangster moved into the field of rap music.¹¹ Characters from *The Wire* are also mentioned in numerous American rap lyrics: for example, Snoop, Omar Little and Wee Bey.¹²

References to the series also abound in French rap music. The rapper Kennedy, popular with French youth, titled his mixtape *Sur Ecoute*, an obvious reference to *The Wire*'s title in French. Several rappers

refer to the series in their lyrics: for example, Sexion d'Assaut in the song 'Melrose Place', '*Ma vie c'est pas Melrose Place, c'est pas non plus The Wire*' ('My life is not Melrose Place, but it's not *The Wire* either'); Kennedy in 'On s'arrange' featuring La Fouine: '*Appelle moi Marlo Stanfield, j'suis pas une balance!*' ('Call me Marlo Stanfield, I'm not a rat!'); or Nessbeal in 'Ça bouge pas': '*Je descendrai dans la street en costard, j'ai la classe à Marlo*' ('I'll walk down the street in a suit, I'm as classy as Marlo'); and Kody Criminel released a street clip entitled *The Wire*. The characters and ambience of the series have permeated the imagery of French rap music and this has helped mythologise the series. But this process has often served to reduce the complex tableau of characters crafted by Simon and Burns to a few basic character traits: Omar the righter of wrongs, Marlo the gangster, etc.—and an ambience, an imaginary 'ghetto' is reproduced and reworked by these video clips. This oversimplification of characters occurs alongside the transposition of 'the ghetto's' seclusion to France's '*banlieues*'. As the antithesis of the driving force behind the series—which strives to constantly connect the reality of the ghetto to that of the city as a whole and to understanding it as part of an urban, social and political system—the ghetto here becomes a generic urban and social space that is a carbon copy of the North American version.

The well-known French rapper Booba has called *The Wire* his favourite TV show. He claims to particularly like Omar's character although he does not identify with him: 'I think I'm a mix of Marlo, Chris Partlow and Bodie Broadus.'¹³ He has stressed the similarities between the Baltimore ghetto and some French neighbourhoods, which are above all tied to the sociability of poor youth:

'Yes, I found similarities with my childhood in the series. When you see kids squatting on couches or occupying an entrance, the fact of not being a rat, the relationship with the

police, the fear of being locked up, the example that the older kids in the neighbourhood represent, it obviously reminds me of stuff.'¹⁴

Booba assimilates French and American situations: 'When I watch, I feel like I'm there.' Similarly, rapper Jean Gabin jokingly stated in an interview: 'I played in *The Wire*. I am Omar [...] Omar sees the street like I see the street. It's not a playground.'¹⁵ He went on to refer to David Simon's previous series, *The Corner*, largely unknown in France, thus providing further evidence that French rappers watch American TV series.

For many French rappers, poor American neighbourhoods are 'the real thing', the real 'toughness' with which they identify. While helping to make the series known, rap culture has seized on and limited its message, which has led some commentators to blog in response to Booba's comments that *The Wire* is nothing but an apology for gangs and violence. This oversimplification has not stopped spectators from interpreting the show in their own manner, however, as this comment reveals from a blogger who points up the complexity of feelings that the most violent characters evoke, going far beyond mere admiration:

'Stringer Bell is the character that was most striking for me personally. He was just a perfect mix between hope and a shadowy figure. His death riveted me. I also bizarrely felt something that was a mix between hate, pity, anger, sadness and anxiety.'¹⁶

Importing the imagery of the ghetto is not new in France and is not the sole remit of sociologists; it is also prominent in French rap music (Hammou 2012; Aidi 2014). The introduction and development of the hip hop movement in France in the 1980s was driven by identification with African Americans.

At the same time, cinema has become an important vector for the imagination and identification of young blacks in France. Several cult films marked the first generation

of the French hip hop movement, which witnessed the emergence of famous black actors and musicians on the other side of the Atlantic. Among these was *Beat Street* (1984), directed by Stan Lathan, one of the first films about hip hop based on the story of a group of black youths from the Bronx; also *The Warriors*, directed by Walter Hill and released in France in 1980; and, a few years later, *Blood in Blood*, by Taylor Hackford (released in France in 1993); followed by *Colours*, directed by Dennis Hopper in 1998. These films provided something with which young blacks—who were never represented in the French media—could identify (Madzou 2008). For the most part, they portrayed heroes who managed to get out but, above all, they put black actors on the screen which was still a rarity in France. This fascination with America is not merely the preserve of young black people. As Aidi (2014) claims in his study of the spread of rap music:

‘An American dream exists in Europe’s Muslim ghettos and it’s very much a black American one. For these young Europeans, America is home to African American Islam, the oldest Muslim presence in the West, the Islam of Malcom X and Muhammad Ali, an Islam that played a critical role in the civil rights movement and in making America more at ease with diversity than Europe.’ (xvi)

While the notion of the ‘Muslim ghetto’ is highly debatable as it is based around a one-dimensional analysis of social and ethnic-racial reality underpinned merely by religious criteria, young people belonging to various different ethnic minorities still share this American cultural and political reference. More than the reference to Islam, it is the sense of belonging to a minority community that makes it possible to understand this identification: in a certain way, everything that isn’t white here is black, although this does not prevent distinctions between different ethnic groups.

It was also the predominance of black actors in *The Wire* that made it successful

amongst poor youth who, for the most part, also belonged to ethno-racial minority groups. The series also worked to transform the way these French youths perceive America and its poor neighbourhoods. Maurice, a young black man who works with youth in the Paris *banlieue* as well as working in cinema, explained that he was eager to introduce young people in his local organisation to the series because he feels the day has not yet come when viewers will see a TV series in France starring primarily black actors. Maurice’s interest in *The Wire* goes further than this: he sees a rejection of segregation and of a ‘rotten’ political system that will inevitably cause people to reflect on the situation in France.

1.3. ‘There are too many blacks in America; it’s wild, they shoot each other’

We observed a similar distancing from the American myth during our discussions about the series in the juvenile offenders’ wing of Nanterre prison, which is only a few hundred metres from Université Paris Ouest Nanterre. These discussions had a twofold pedagogical and research objective and sought to further our understanding about how the series was received. This was a difficult undertaking given current detention conditions and unfortunately, we were not able to do everything we wanted due to the strict rules enforced in the juvenile wing which made it impossible to work regularly over a long period.¹⁷ Our meetings with incarcerated youth were not intended to be a French version of the screening of the series organised by Sudhir Venkatesh in the Bronx,¹⁸ that is, to ascertain whether (or not) the reality of French neighbourhoods corresponds to the depiction of society in a fictional series. Rather, we were looking to understand what the different ways in which the series was received tell us about French view(s) of America, the social imagery they draw upon and the meanings they create. And yet the need to compare

was nonetheless recurrent throughout these discussions.

Instead, we focus on the dual shift in perspective created by the series. On the one hand, certain images reminded these young people of their own daily routines in so far as they show young people like themselves in situations of social and urban marginality belonging to a racialised group, albeit in a different context, that is, Baltimore. It is on this basis that they identify with or differentiate themselves vis-à-vis the series. On the other hand, it also challenges their representations of American ghettos forged through rap, TV crime series and cinema which serve to underpin their identities. *The Wire* simultaneously depicts the Baltimore ghetto—using hyper-realistic characters and situations in terms of their complexity—and a generic ghetto. This dual shift in perspective enables them to analyse the reality or verisimilitude of the series and identify with it while maintaining a certain distance. It generates a certain conflict between reality, fiction and simulacrum.

The young people to whom we spoke found that the series resonated with familiar elements in their relationship with public space. This impression is linked to the hyper-realism of the series as well as the host of workaday detail that ‘suggests a “real” space and a lived space. This is not merely an anonymous crime scene, but a place where ordinary life goes on’ (Speidel 2009).

During our conversations, the young people mentioned the orange couch placed outside buildings which is at the centre of several scenes in the series and has fuelled a lot of cinematographic commentary. They claimed that ‘it exists everywhere’; one young man recalled that in his neighbourhood a long extension cord plugged into the building’s lobby allowed people to watch TV outside, together. This relationship with public space, the presence of groups comprised essentially of young men and the prevalence of drug dealing depicted a particular ambience, although the settings in which

these occurred were very different since large housing projects in the French *banlieues* are nothing like those in Baltimore.

However, for most people the comparison stopped there. The pessimism and overall sense of failure that pervade much of the series’ storylines seemed to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the respondents to identify with the situation in America as presented in *The Wire*. Nor could they recognise themselves in the complex set of characters portrayed in the series. Indeed, *The Wire* does not showcase the America of successful blacks—even through violence or drug dealing—but rather their seclusion in the ghetto. Unlike rap videos that talk about the ghetto, the series constantly forges links with the city as a whole. Several people mentioned the inability of the series’ characters to escape: for example, Stringer Bell, a shady character who attempts to understand and apply the laws of capitalism; Marlo, who despite the possibilities offered to him by his lawyer and the risks involved cannot help but return to the ghetto; or ‘D’, who is held hostage by loyalty to his family. As Lucien, a former drug dealer, noted: ‘It’s like there’s a calling, a call to return to the neighbourhood that takes hold of you.’ The only exceptions to this tableau are young Damon, who is adopted by a former cop, and perhaps Bubbles, a drug addict who manages to move back into family life at the end of the series. Lucien continued: ‘That’s how you feel sometimes. They are in a world and an environment where they have no choice but to live with these codes.’

Pride in seeing blacks on the screen occurred alongside a bitter realisation and it was above all the differences that most interviewees stressed. Comments focused on the extent and forms of poverty: ‘You can see that over there it’s really destitute. In France too, here too, there are poor people everywhere, but you see that it’s not like over there.’ Seventeen-year-old Mejid noted that there are public services in France. It was particularly the scale and widespread visibility of drug dealing, violence and the

vulnerability of the children in this system that shocked: 'It's like they're not normal, it's like they're not from the same planet as us, they're lost ... The kids, they should be in CE2,¹⁹ but there they are, they're selling drugs, they have guns.' While there is certainly a well-established drug economy in the Paris region neighbourhoods of those with whom we spoke, including the use of the '*fours*' system—drug dealers controlling one or more stairwells in buildings—, and despite the oppressive nature of this for inhabitants, it is nonetheless nothing like the scenes shown in *The Wire*: 'The "*fours*", they're not the same, it's in a building. The cops can't see what's going on. They know it's happening, but they can only see the comings and goings, that's it.' Those with whom we spoke were both fascinated and surprised at how well organised drug dealing was in the series. While in their own neighbourhoods 'it's each man for himself', it was nonetheless 'not like that here, there's no boss of the city; that's not possible here'; 'There's no neighbourhood boss; someone might make more money than you, do more business, but there's no boss.' With a certain degree of admiration, they also stressed the scale of dealing depicted in the series: 'It's not like here, they control everything!'; 'Hey, can you imagine, controlling all of the 9.3,²⁰ Sevran is yours, Saint-Denis²¹ too!' Or: 'They have 200 hits left, they say that's nothing. Imagine having 200 hits here! Imagine a person that could sell 200 hits every day!'

Lucien explained: 'There are not yet people who have decided to do things in an industrial manner like in the United States [...] To concentrate the market in a few hands, another level of violence would be required.' The right to bear firearms was underscored as another major difference with France: 'A guy walking down the street with a gun, normal, I don't see that here.' Everyone agreed that the lack of gun control was a problem in the USA.

But the most troublesome thing for the French youths with whom we spoke was

the fragile nature of human relations and more specifically the prominence of betrayal amongst friends and family members; for example, that which led to the arrest of Avon Barksdale, to the death of his childhood friend Stringer Bell or to the execution of Prop Jo by his own nephew. Amongst those we met—and occasionally within the same individual—there were conflicting norms and contradictory feelings about the rules of loyalty. Not being a rat was an obvious basic rule and those we spoke with were unanimous in thinking that it was wrong of young Wallace, who was hopelessly trying to get out of 'the game', to supply information to the police: 'He chose to do that, he's got to accept the consequences; he could have gone to school, he could have said no.' Yet this certainty disappeared when he was executed by a friend: 'It's a matter of principle: you don't kill your friend, when you've grown up with people ...' These few extracts from our discussions show the extent to which the social and human relations experience of young people conditions their interpretation of the series. The fiction reflects an image from which they maintain a certain distance and they point out that it's not like that here and that it is just fiction.

Ultimately, most agreed with Mejid: 'I would really rather that things did not happen like that in France, because life's not as hard [here].' A few also conveyed the idea that 'in France, our experience is the same as in the United States, but with a lag of a few years' and this sense of a time lag occasionally resulted in disbelief: for example, Mourad said, 'You can tell it's a film; the police are everywhere, they do what they want; when they arrive in the ghetto; they arrest everyone, they hit everyone. You can tell that's fiction; that's not how it happens for real.' Jo said, 'I don't know whether that's true; is that really what it's like?' Indeed, *The Wire* does not offer an image of America as the land of success and upward social mobility for those who really want to succeed. Instead it portrays a

world in which even the most resourceful and creative individuals remain bound by its social and spatial determinism. This did not escape those with whom we spoke and although they spoke about French institutions critically, they nonetheless had great expectations.

It was also striking that the youths we met during this study provided very different answers when asked about their favourite character on the show. For one young black man, it was McNulty, a white police officer, 'the only non-careerist; a mix of morality and immorality'; for another it was Avon Barksdale, the drug kingpin; for yet another it was Omar, because 'he is determined and leaves nothing to chance' or because he 'breaks all the codes, even that of being homosexual'. His independent nature and drive to right wrongs drew admiration, but his homosexuality raised questions and several of the youths asked whether he was also gay 'in real life'. As Lloyd said: 'I can't put myself in the characters' shoes. I don't know their fear.' By making it impossible to identify with the reality depicted, the series works to blur issues, raise questions and challenge overly simplistic images of America. It is therefore also inherently political.

Nevertheless, it would be too rash to conclude that this analysis will lead these young people to accept the French reality. On the contrary, the confusion created by the gap between a hyper-realistic representation reflecting the complexity of the ghetto, the simulacrum of the ghetto in itself and the experience of the young people raises numerous questions. The resulting uneasiness leads them to adopt the attitude of an active spectator challenging the relationship between reality, fiction and simulacrum. It can lead them to develop criticism of the class and race relationships that underpin their situation and of forms of exploitation and social solidarity. This may also lead to a form of cynicism in the hope that fiction does not become reality in French neighbourhoods.

1.4. *The Wire through the prism of French series*

To fully understand the success of *The Wire* in France, it is also necessary to examine the landscape of French TV programmes and their depiction of underprivileged neighbourhoods. We can partly explain its success by the sociological poverty of French series. Over the past 30 years, French cinema has focused a great deal on poor and distressed neighbourhoods. So many films have embraced this backdrop that it has become a genre or sub-genre—the category itself is still under debate: '*banlieue* films' (Wagner 2011). Not to be outdone, TV news reports, programmes and documentaries also play a central role in constructing people's representations (Champagne 1991; Berthaut 2013). Until very recently however, no TV series had yet ventured into this world or been set in these territories. By remaining most often decontextualised or else rooted in more consensual and ideal-type downtown or peri-urban territories comprised of single-family homes, French TV series have instead rendered poor neighbourhoods and their inhabitants invisible. The private Canal Plus pay TV channel, which may in some respects be seen as the French equivalent of the American HBO channel, has produced series filmed in other types of territories, in '*banlieue* neighbourhoods', but these are police shows that use their urban setting merely as a backdrop and whose depiction of the chaotic and delinquent nature of such territories only supports and reinforces the violence of the plot. But it is not the desire that is lacking: at a conference that we organised, a number of French movie directors expressed their wish to put on a version of '*The Wire à la française*'.

In this context, only one French series so far has really focused on the '*banlieue*'. Entitled *La Commune*, it was first broadcast in 2007 on Canal Plus. It depicted a neighbourhood in which dealers, politicians and 'men of faith' battled for control. It was praised by the specialist press as the series

France had been waiting for, one that would finally be able to rival with the best American series. Its creator, Abdel Raouf Dafri, who has also written a number of scripts for French series produced by Canal Plus and for the cinema (including *A Prophet* by Jacques Audiard, 2009), does not hide his admiration for American-produced TV series and in numerous interviews he has criticised the poor quality of French-produced ones. This stance undoubtedly helped him win an International Emmy Award in the Drama Series category for the script of *Braquo 2* (French-produced series broadcast on Canal Plus). The reason why the series has received so much praise is undoubtedly because tackling the whole subject of the *banlieue* was deemed to be a courageous thing to do: ‘*La Commune: no quarter given to the cité*’,²² ‘*a fiction that tackles the banlieue, its inhabitants, drama and violence head-on*’,²³ ‘*the TV series that rehabilitates the banlieue*’,²⁴ etc. The magazine *Ciné Live* even went as far as to claim that it was ‘*the first French TV series shot in a banlieue neighbourhood. Religious fundamentalism, criminality, unemployment, political shenanigans ... It’s a complete picture that reflects reality*’.²⁵ *La Commune* is based around the interplay between reality and fiction, and to this extent its ambitions are similar to *The Wire*. Abdel Raouf Dafri uses this social and physical rootedness to ‘analyse society’. He insists upon the representativeness of *La Commune* and on its realistic setting: ‘*La commune is a type of no man’s land, a frontier city. I didn’t exaggerate anything. Reality is worse. Even though the neighbourhood I created doesn’t actually exist, it is an amalgamation of all violent cities*.’ He seeks to use this to ‘unmask’ certain social realities, drawing upon his own background growing up in a rough neighbourhood, and on his journalistic expertise working for the France 3 Nord TV channel, just like David Simon on the *Baltimore Sun*: ‘*it’s my naked truth [...] a story about local kids who are completely lost, a story that is a reality and needs to be told*’.²⁶ The *cité* (social housing

projects) served as the plot’s support, and even helped to drive it along because its future—its renovation and the associated challenges, notably in terms of rehousing—was one of the key plot mechanisms, just like the ghettos of West Baltimore in *The Wire*. Certain artistic and technical choices were made reflecting a desire to get as close as possible to reality. In particular, a decision was taken to shoot the series in ‘real surroundings’ in the Paris Region (in *département* 93), requiring four months of seeking out locations, and local inhabitants participated directly in making the series as extras, mediators and looking after equipment. The composition of the cast also sought to reflect the reality and representativeness of French society, a practice that differed markedly from the traditional French TV landscape which has been reluctant to depict the ‘visible minorities’ (Macé 2007). It featured characters of sub-Saharan, North African, Eastern European and South American origin, which meant recruiting both professional and amateur actors from these multicultural backgrounds. Director Philippe Triboit has as such underscored one unique feature of the project: ‘It is nevertheless the first series in which the heroes were white, black and Arab in equal numbers and with equally complex roles.’ As well as making them visible, *La Commune* portrayed these different communities in the different political games at play. Lastly, even though we are a long way from the small brick buildings and the towers of Lexington Terrace in Baltimore, we can still point to a number of themes that are common to both series: the question of urban renovation, the use of demolition as a prized tool for change, the contrast between the physical space that serves as the medium for a project and the territory lived in by the inhabitants, and political promises to rehouse populations in new housing projects, etc.

However, while *La Commune* is underpinned by this reality/fiction interplay, we are a long way from the social science fiction of *The Wire*. *La Commune* advances

a different, less sociological, critical and engaged thesis, and ultimately consolidates a mainstream vision of the urban ghetto as a parallel world and place of isolation. Like *The Wire*, the tableau depicted was grim and quite hopeless but whereas *The Wire* strived to describe the neighbourhoods of deprived West Baltimore—and, in doing so, the system and institutions (i.e. police, City Hall and the court system) behind it, the *cité* in *La Commune* was depicted as being responsible for the tragic destiny of its inhabitants. Far from showing poor neighbourhoods as a backdrop for the collateral effects of the capitalist system, *La Commune* showed the French *banlieue* as a parallel world, cut off from society, with its own rules and codes. Indeed, this picture harks back to analyses of US ghettos (Wilson 1987, 1996) based on the underclass category (Fassin 1996; Wacquant 1996). *La Commune*'s creators offered a schematic and oversimplified vision of poor neighbourhoods: 'blacks and Arabs'

confined to their projects, this was both a starting and an end point, a world unto itself. While it was indeed specified that *La Commune* was a neighbourhood in a city (whose name was never given), the other neighbourhoods were never mentioned and the downtown area was never shown. The characters—much like the viewers—never left the neighbourhood. Starting with the opening credits, the *cité* was presented as a geographically isolated space, in the middle of fields, making it a place of relegation and exclusion, an oppressing, violent and cut-off universe. Figure 1, taken from the series' opening credits, is a good reflection of the ecological conception depicted in *La Commune*: a city that has literally fallen from the sky onto virgin land. This is diametrically opposed to the approach used in *The Wire* which depicts the Baltimore ghetto as the flip-side of the American dream in a fundamentally dialectic perspective. In Figure 2, McNulty is leaving the US capital after spending the night with Theresa



Figure 1 Extract from the opening of *La Commune*.



Figure 2 Extract from episode 9, season 3 of *The Wire*.

D'Agostino, an ambitious Washington-based political consultant and campaign fixer. Aside from individuals, by forging links and interconnections between the pauperised ghettos of Baltimore and the spheres of the American political and economic elite, David Simon offers viewers a systemic analysis of society.

Furthermore, *La Commune*'s internal functioning was based on a panoptical model: people were constantly observing and being observed. The blocks and towers of the *cité* faced onto a central carpark with a few stores on the ground floor level. Consequently, the flats were look-outs and ideal observation posts. This constant social control (of which anyone could be the target) further reflected a common perception of large social housing complexes: it was impossible to escape both from the *cité* and one's destiny. The *cité* became a leading contributor to the tragic destiny of its

inhabitants; there was no entirely positive path therein, and no way out.

This thesis was served up through a certain number of *clichés*, including emblematic figures (if not caricatures) of life in 'the projects'. There was on the one hand a series of characters and scenes involving 'youths' who hang out, squat and conduct their illicit activities at the foot of buildings and in car-parks; 'cops' who conduct abusive identity checks; journalists looking for stories rooted in social tension; and a drug-addicted homosexual confronted with ambient homophobia but who is always ready to turn a trick for a hit. There was also a series of places used to construct the typical backdrop of a troubled housing project: the camera spanned over passageways—leading to a set of flats but also allowing the comings and goings in the carpark at the foot of the buildings to be observed—, into graffitied stairwells and broken down lifts, and ended up

in the basement, which served as a hideaway for weapons and drugs, and as a den for illicit and adulterous sexual relations. Finally, the series depicted various types of deviance often associated with poor neighbourhoods: the dealing of (hard) drugs as such appeared to be a main source of income, particularly given that no reference was made to any other professional activities amongst any of the main characters. The eight episodes of the season were filled with scenes of people shooting up, descriptions of physical pain related to detoxification and death by overdose. Another type of deviance was also widely depicted: violence towards women in all its forms. The erosion of the family was a third form of deviance associated with the world of the housing projects. These images are also present in *The Wire* but in *La Commune*, it is the fact that they alone characterise the entire neighbourhood that turns them into caricatures. And while *The Wire* too has been criticised for its overly cynical (Atlas and Dreier 2008) or too one-sided vision, this image is constructed based on characters who evolve in a context of social and institutional relations. Such details are largely lacking in *La Commune*, which is a divine creation conceived in a parallel world cut off from society, with its own rules and codes. Any explanations for the problems and vices of its inhabitants are largely to be found in human nature itself. This is a far cry from David Simon's political critique of a post-Fordist society that has lost its way and the pointing up of processes of domination in *The Wire*. This is true to such an extent that, ultimately, what we remember from *La Commune* is the violence, evil and harshness of this world, which in turn reinforces the worst images and representations of poor '*banlieue*' neighbourhoods portrayed in the media.

Given the paucity of offerings on French TV, it is of little surprise that *The Wire* provided ample matter to stoke debate and discussion in the academic sphere and amongst youth in underprivileged neighbourhoods.

2. Conclusion

The success of *The Wire* in France is due both to its form—a fictional TV series with an interesting sociological and cinematographic perspective—and the power of its thesis—criticising an unequal system. The way *The Wire* was received in France must be understood as part of a long, transatlantic conversation rooted in two histories and two social and political 'models', but also within a transnational context of cultural and symbolic importation and hybridisation, as described by Paul Gilroy (1993) in *The Black Atlantic*.

The view that French audiences have of America oscillates between fascination and rejection, but the series allows people to move beyond this dualism by shedding light on the social and political processes at work and, particularly, the *modus operandi* of a system in its entirety. From France, it offers a vision of the black world that remains exotic and it points up processes that are both similar and different between poor French neighbourhoods and African-American ghettos: neighbourhoods less ravaged by violence and drugs, where weapons are less prevalent and in which public services still exist. The power of *The Wire* is that it moves beyond the weight of words—like 'ghetto'—which have imposed themselves as transnational metaphors and are used and reclaimed by different media targeting very different audiences, and instead showcases their meaning via shared and individual experiences. This nuanced description keeps people—and particularly youths from underprivileged neighbourhoods who belong to ethnic minorities—from identifying fully with the engaging characters in the series; it raises troubling questions that are inherently political. In the French context, geographical distance surely attenuates the cynical and pessimistic tone of *The Wire*. However, it raises questions about the reality of poor French neighbourhoods whose treatment in the media tends to shift between an exaggerated or unrealistic vision and complete invisibility. The series fuels a socially stratified

sociological imaginary but it also directly tackles ethno-racial issues that are still largely unaddressed in French debates.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

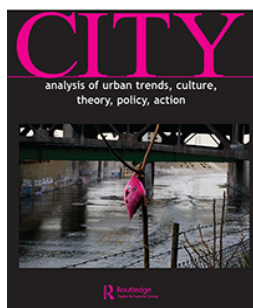
- 1 Including *Time Magazine's* best TV show of the year in 2002 and the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 2007.
- 2 *Dissent* (2008); *Film Quarterly* (2008); *Darkmatter* (2009); *Criticism* (2010); *City* (2010); *Critical Inquiry* (2011).
- 3 Burdeau and Vieillescazes (2011); Bacqué et al. (2014).
- 4 See, for example, Cherry (2012).
- 5 Scranton (2010) quoted by Parker (2010).
- 6 Quoted by Speidel (2009).
- 7 'The Wire: A Fiction in the Ghetto', for seminars from January to June 2012 and a conference entitled 'The Wire. Visages du ghetto entre fictions et sciences sociales', 26 and 27 October 2012, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense organised by Marie-Hélène Bacqué, Amélie Flamand, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris and Julien Talpin.
- 8 See, for example: <http://www.franceinfo.fr/medias/le-plus-france-info/quand-la-serie-the-wire-entre-a-l-universite-551089-2012-03-09>; <http://www.lemouv.fr/diffusion-the-wire-debarque-a-la-fac>; <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-la-grande-table-autour-de-la-serie-the-wire-rencontre-litteraire-entre-alain-julien-rudofou>; <http://www.franceinter.fr/emission-3d-le-journal-le-yoga-et-les-series-telivisees-nouveau-sujet-d-etudes>; <http://www.frenchculture.org/spip.php?article4869>; <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/agenda/20120104.OBS8069/du-13-janvier-au-1er-juin-the-wire-a-la-fac-de-nanterre.html>; <http://bigbrowser.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/01/11/shiiiiiiiit-la-serie-the-wire-etudiee-a-l-universite-de-nanterre/>; http://www.lemonde.fr/m/article/2012/01/27/the-wire-du-petit-ecran-a-l-amphi_1634710_1575563.html; http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2012/06/05/a-l-universite-de-nanterre-la-serie-the-wire-passee-au-crible_1712421_3246.html; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GBjGUVUmDs>
- 9 Among others: *Marianne*, 27 June–3 July 2014 'séries télé, du sofa aux amphes'; *Libération*, Rebonds, 'Et si les sciences sociales irriguaient le cinéma et les séries?', 14 May 2014; 'La suite dans les idées' radio programme, show entitled 'The Wire, une série sur écoute académique', France Culture, 3 May 2014.
- 10 In Great Britain, Chris Grayling, the Opposition Shadow Interior Minister, argued that poor English neighbourhoods were mired in the same urban violence and gang culture, and used the series as proof that the Labour government had failed to maintain order in the poorest territories. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8219482.stm> (quoted by Penfold-Mounce, Beer, and Burrows 2011).
- 11 <http://www.abcdrduson.com/blog/2009/07/le-rap-et-the-wire/>
- 12 For the references to these lyrics, see: <http://rappersrappingaboutthewire.tumblr.com/>
- 13 <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2012/11/25/musique/booba-11326100/>
- 14 <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2012/11/25/musique/booba-11326100/>
- 15 <http://www.2kmusic.com/fr/clip/mcjeangab1/saXPniNh8s/mc-jean-gab1-j-ai-joue-dans-the-wire>
- 16 <http://www.abcdrduson.com/blog/2010/11/booba-x-the-wire/FUNKYCOPS>
- 17 Our initial proposal to work with youths over several weeks ended up being limited to four two-hour sessions held in June and July 2012. Scheduling in the juvenile offenders' wing and the fact that incarcerated youths often do not know how long they will stay in Nanterre hampered regular work and follow-up with the same young people. Our findings here are based on group discussions conducted with four groups of three or four incarcerated youths (an initial meeting to present the series; a second meeting after viewing several episodes; a third and in some cases a fourth meeting to watch an episode together) and on additional interviews conducted outside of prison with youth or young adults, including some who were drug dealers or former drug dealers.
- 18 Venkatesh Sudhir, 'What Do Real Thugs Think of The Wire?', *Freakonomics*, posted on 9 June 2008.
- 19 The primary school class in which French children are generally eight or nine years old.
- 20 The '9.3' is slang for the Seine-Saint-Denis department located on the northern outskirts of Paris. It is one of the poorest French departments, home to a large immigrant population and has become a symbol of social exclusion.
- 21 Sevran and Saint-Denis are two cities in the Seine-Saint-Denis department.
- 22 *Libération*, Monday 27 November 2007.
- 23 Stéphanie Binet, *Libération.fr*, Monday 27 November 2007.
- 24 Guillaume Botton, *Télé Star*, 20 November 2007.
- 25 Marc Toullec, *Ciné Live*, 27 November 2007.
- 26 'Abdel Raouf Dafri, nouveau prophète du scénario', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 25 August 2009.

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Linking race, the value of land and the value of life

Andrea Gibbons

This paper works to more fully integrate critical theories of race and privilege with political economy to explore the connections between segregation, property values and violence in US cities. Through the prism of Los Angeles (LA), it exposes the economic mechanisms and history of violent struggle by which whiteness became, and remains, an intrinsic component of high land values. The resulting articulations of racial ideologies and geography, connecting circuits of real estate capital to common sense and racialised constructions of 'community', have helped drive LA's fragmented and unsustainable form and increasing privatisation. They also lie at the root of violence inflicted upon those excluded, both ideologically and physically, from white constructions of community. This dynamic is key for theorising in support of ongoing justice struggles to create safe and sustainable cities for all.

Key words: segregation, racism, white privilege, hegemony, political economy, Los Angeles

For all the localisms, particularities, variegations and specificities of US cities, there is one aspect of urban life that has remained constant despite struggle and numerous victories. This is segregation (Massey and Denton 1993). For those on the wrong side of its boundaries, it results in what are life-constraining and too often death-dealing differences in terms of access to jobs, transportation, health care, healthy food, healthy air, healthy and secure homes, green spaces, quality education, insurance, bank accounts, networks, personal wealth, the prospect for happiness and a full life having never seen the inside of a prison wall (Alexander 2012; Sharkey 2008). This list can be extended almost indefinitely through the intersections of social, environmental, economic and spatial injustices. This is not to say that there is no vibrancy or community, happiness or full life in the ghetto, but that such pockets are

created through fierce love, determination and struggle against a weight of exploitation, racism and the decay of the urban and social fabric. In Los Angeles (LA), once vibrant neighbourhoods have been essentially cut off from resources, and submerged beneath or split into two by massive freeways to allow people from the suburbs to travel above and through poverty and disinvestment at speed. This signals a society willing to resign itself to their slow death without caring for the fate of their inhabitants. The question of who is to blame continues to be fought in the media.

Too often these debates are conducted as if LA's segregation, like almost all US cities, had not developed through a long history of race restrictions, white mobs, burning crosses, harassment, bombings, racist real estate appraisal guidelines, redlining and racialised steering practices. Many of these practices continue into the present, just as

their consequences continue to be etched in decaying concrete and opportunities denied (Bell 2007). They clearly show the curious reality that one human being's money has—for centuries and across the whole of the USA—not been as good as another's when it comes to buying and occupying a home. Capitalist logics contain no intrinsic reason why race should play any role at all in efforts to generate profits through the buying and selling of land, nor why in the US context, a determinant of land value should ever have to come to be the race of its occupants. This paper explores the mechanisms by which they have.

Robinson (1983) outlines the ways in which orthodox Marxist theories of capitalist development postulated that by its own internal logics, capitalism itself would destroy not only racial distinctions, but all differentiating characteristics of the proletariat. For many on the left, a focus on race worked counter to progress and actually hindered the movement to unite the working classes. It is often simply seen as a complicating but ultimately marginal factor to the city's development with ghettoisation as an unfortunate side effect (for further analysis, see HoSang, LaBennett, and Pulido 2013; Omi and Winant 1994; Roberts and Mahtani 2010). Yet capitalism has grown through the creation and exploitation of racial divisions, they are intrinsic to it rather than accidental (among others, see Roediger 2008; Robinson 1983). Thus, in the words of Stuart Hall (1980), 'Capital reproduces the class, including its internal contradictions, as a whole—structured by race', and these divisions remain 'the site of capital's continuing hegemony over it' (341).

White supremacy emerged to justify white rights to property—both slaves and land (Robinson 1983; Roediger 2008), and this is as visible in the North of the USA as it is in the South. California was annexed by conquest in 1848, vast properties taken over from Mexican settlers by Anglos through a process of legal and extra-legal methods and continued acts of genocide against a fast shrinking Native American population

(McWilliams 1946). Anglos justified seizure of the best lands—in terms of agricultural fertility and mineral wealth—through discourses of manifest destiny based upon Anglo-Saxon supremacy, pushing native and immigrant groups to marginal areas (Almaguer 1994; McWilliams 1946). An LA Chamber of Commerce article titled 'The Los Angeles of Tomorrow' encapsulated their vision: 'For centuries, the Anglo-Saxon race has been marching westward. It is now on the shores of the Pacific. It can go no farther. The apex of this movement is Los Angeles County' (Davis 2000, 73–74).

While definitions of prime and marginal lands have clearly shifted over time, the fact remains that maintenance of land as an asset of the Anglo-Saxon race has remained constant. Even as Ed Soja (1996) writes of LA as a 'Cosmopolis', claiming a 'derigidifying of the social boundaries of class, race and income grouping' (445), Ethington, Frey, and Myers (2001) summarise their findings on the nature of its segregation:

- '1. Whites have retreated to a periphery and the other principal ethnic groups are less and less likely to have them as neighbours.
2. Blacks are the most isolated racial group; other racial groups have remained highly unlikely to have them as neighbours.
3. Hispanics and Asians are becoming more isolated even as they cause the county as a whole to be more diverse.' (1)

They note that whites alone

'had the freedom to settle wherever their wealth enables them to purchase a home. They have used that freedom to flee the growing diversity of the metropolis, either by moving out of the county completely or by retreating to its edges.' (Ethington, Frey, and Myers 2001, 2)

An earlier mapping of LA through 1994 showed how home values corresponded almost exactly with this retreat, with peoples of colour consistently hemmed into the 'slow-growth, low opportunity core' (Ethington 2000, 39).

Lefebvre (1996, 109) argues that one definition of the city is ‘as a projection of society on the ground’; it is a way to see society itself mapped into the urban, but it is much more than a projection. The geographical sedimentation of economic, political and ideological structures itself becomes constitutive of policies and ideologies (Lefebvre 1991, 1996). What, then, does it mean that the drive towards segregation has remained so powerful? As an answer, this paper builds a framework to incorporate both the insights of political economy and cultural and critical race theory. It explores how white supremacy has been built into definitions of US land values and how this has articulated with the form of the city and ideas of community and belonging. It argues that the resulting physical mapping of segregated communities sits in dialectical relation both to the mental mappings of community and to the maintenance of a privileged white hegemony through defence of white space.

The illustrative examples from LA’s history presented here come first from thematic analysis of articles from two of LA’s African-American newspapers, *The California Eagle* (referenced as *CE*) and the *Sentinel* from 1914 to 1963, mapping every incident of white violence against African Americans moving into their neighbourhoods, as well as documenting the rhetoric of neighbourhood groups from local white newspapers whose archives have not been preserved. These dynamics are compared to those currently visible through the gentrification of skid row, uncovered through interviews and examining newspaper and email archives in research carried out between 2011 and 2014. The process of exploring continuities between past and present and the nature of the historical sources throws into high relief the segregation between black and white, which is used to illuminate the articulations of racial ideologies, land values and ideas of community. LA has always been a city of diverse and shifting racial hierarchies. The hope is that a focus on the groups at the top

and the bottom of this hierarchy will deepen spatial understandings of the whole. Space constraints mean that while such hierarchies are marked here, their analysis is not fully developed.¹ This is also true of the intersections of race, gender and class, where a focus on race does not mean to discount the intersectionality at play. Women’s traditional roles in defining and defending the home, as well as the twinned dynamic of white male violence against women of colour and white male fears of miscegenation and violent defence of white women play a key part in the dynamics discussed here, and are explored more fully elsewhere.²

The political economy of uneven development

David Harvey’s (2007) *Limits of Capital* (see also Harvey 1973, 1985) develops a comprehensive theory of property and rent (briefly summarised here in order to build on it), showing how property investment and development have been a key solution to overaccumulation—an intrinsic contradiction of capitalism. The increasing centrality of real estate in the USA and global economies emerges from a function of the ‘spatial fix’, which allows surplus value to be channelled away from direct production and into a secondary circuit of capital—the built environment. Lefebvre (2003) writes:

‘The city, or what remains of it or what it will become, is better suited than it has ever been before for the accumulation of capital; that is, the accumulation, realization, and distribution of surplus value.’(35)

Converted into a purely financial instrument, land is treated as nothing more than a commodity at this scale, its rent an asset available to be traded on the worldwide market and subject to global investment demands rather than local needs. Thus, a global force organised around the need to maximise profit comes to operate with devastating effect on a very local and personal level—that of the

neighbourhood and the home. This development is cyclical and uneven, maximising profits through development in one place only to move on to the next.

Neil Smith's (1982, 1992, 1996) work further develops how this spatial fix has been a primary mover both of suburbanisation and the return of capital to the inner cities in processes of gentrification. He theorises the process of devalorisation of inner-city areas as a function primarily of time, 'an obvious sequence of transitions in the tenure arrangements, occupancy, and physical condition of properties in a neighborhood', a 'downward sequence' (Smith 1982, 147). The movement of capital to the suburbs entails its abandonment of the inner city, leaving neighbourhoods to decay to the point that ground rent dependent on the use of the land is far less than the ground rent that could be collected if that land use were to change. This is the origin of the rent gap: 'When, and only when, this rent gap between actual and potential ground rent becomes sufficiently large, redevelopment and rehabilitation into new land uses becomes a profitable prospect, and capital begins to flow back into the inner city market' (Smith 1982, 149). Clearly, Smith makes some assumptions about the nature of transitions in occupancy in this temporal downward sequence, but they remain vague for the most part. Smith writes 'the question of where this capital flooding into the built environment will locate has no automatic answer' (150).

This is in spite of the fact that Smith (1996) came closer to an understanding of how race has been central in shaping these transitions through his case studies, particularly through his work on the revanchist city:

'This revanchist antiurbanism represents a reaction against the supposed "theft" of the city, a desperate defense of a challenged phalanx of privileges, cloaked in the populist language of civic morality, family values and neighbourhood security. More than anything the revanchist city expresses a race/class/

gender terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites who are suddenly stuck in place by a ravaged property market, the threat and reality of unemployment, the decimation of social services, and the emergence of minority and immigrant groups ...' (211)

The connections between place and white privilege are here brought forward through recognition of the fear of loss of privilege, but why that automatic connection between the race/class/gender terror, the advent of 'minority and immigrant groups' and falling property values? A full explanation of this dynamic remains absent, even though it lies at the very heart of both the tragedy of low-income neighbourhoods of colour fighting resource flight and a constellation of geographically situated oppressions, as well as the mass displacement in these neighbourhoods once investment returns to redevelop and rebuild.

It is in the dialectic between the use value and exchange value of land that the nexus lies between (racial) ideologies, economics and politics as they articulate with the physical form of the city. Sociologists Logan and Molotch (1987) point to the nature of land as a most idiosyncratic commodity, 'place is not a discreet element, like a toy or even food; the precise conditions of its use determines how other elements, including other commodities will be used' (18). People forge material, spiritual and psychological connections with place as well as with the people and locations surrounding them through common experience created by a shared geography. It shapes their daily lives, who can help them get ahead, their chances for education and connections to culture. Logan and Molotch recognise that neighbourhoods 'organize life chances in the same sense as do the more familiar dimensions of caste and class' (19), but never explore how these dimensions intersect.

Property ownership ensures that this understanding of use value and its impact on life pathways and opportunities always sits alongside its exchange value—for most, a home is also seen as a financial asset.

Logan and Molotch (1987) argue that the drive behind constant urban expansion and development at larger scales is the nature of place as 'a market commodity that can produce wealth and power for its owners'—the more development, the more wealth is generated and the city becomes a 'growth machine. One that can increase aggregate rents and trap related wealth' (50). The generation of profit through the urban form becomes paramount in local politics, and the power of developers creating the maximum exchange value is familiar in its ability to often, not always, trump the use values of homeowners. But again Logan and Molotch face the question raised by Smith (1982) of where and how this capital flooding into the development of the built environment will locate and what it will build, though their own arguments make part of the answer obvious—where a rent gap exists and the homeowners with the least amount of power, wealth and status are to be found.

The second half of the answer also lies in their theorisation of land's use value. This raises some flags for critical race analysis, particularly as racism and the role it plays in dynamics such as white flight are casually enough mentioned that they become a minor, perhaps exceptional, phenomenon. Thus, while recognising the uniqueness of land as a commodity and that its exchange value is at least in some part socially constructed, they miss two important processes: first, the ways in which racial ideologies have been key in the construction of value through years of homeowner-protected racially restrictive neighbourhoods along with professional and governmental policies prioritising a homogenous white area as the most significant factor in the appraisal of land values; and second, how a racialised property market has produced inequalities of wealth and power through its facilitation of the social reproduction of white privilege, as well as the wealth and power it generates as an asset for whites through market exchange.

In defending and further explaining the growth machine concept, Molotch (1993)

later writes: 'I avoid social problems, like race and violent crime, which although often euphemistically termed "urban", lack central theoretic relation to place' (31). Seeing race as simply a 'social problem' makes it impossible to see the ways in which constructions of race have organised space and been fundamental to constructions of both its use and exchange values in North American cities. This theorisation of land values, however, allows us to see how racial ideologies become co-constitutive of urban space through the way in which they inform how value is understood and appraised in this drive to create wealth through development. Land structures experience, shapes lives (and deaths), opens up opportunities or closes them down for its occupants. Its use value is thus as important in achieving and maintaining wealth and privilege as its exchange value.

A short history of land values, racial ideologies and hegemony

Bringing critical race theory together with political economy extends the explanatory power of both in understanding the articulation of the urban form and constructions of race. They are particularly necessary in trying to understand the form LA has taken, and the violence that has been mobilised to protect white space, both by the state and by white grass-roots groups.

That race is socially constructed is fundamental. While race has no essence, racism does, and as Ruth Gilmore (2002) states so eloquently, it is a violent one: 'Racism is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference within hierarchies ...' (16). A handful of critical geographers have long been arguing that this abstraction is not only socially, but also spatially, constructed and this construction in turn is constitutive of space (Gilmore 2002; Hart 2002; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Peake and Kobayashi 2002; Price 2010; Pulido 2000, 2006).

Stuart Hall (1988) theorises hegemony as a series of conjunctures, particular articulations of the political, economic and ideological that are born of a 'process of social reproduction as continuous and contradictory—the very opposite of a functional achievement' (54). Integrating a spatial analysis allows for the links between economic structures, politics, ideologies and space to be drawn and redrawn over time with final determinism granted to none, charting changing hegemonies and identifying strategic points of weakness for concrete and strategic oppositional action. This focus on process, change and resistance in the creation of a complex hegemonic structure is key to a more profound understanding of how strategies maintaining white domination and privilege through segregation have changed in relation to struggle and material spatial change, and how they have articulated with the demands of capital and the ideologies and the practices of privatisation that have also developed through this process.

Through tracing the multiple violences employed to preserve the hegemony of white privilege through white neighbourhoods, this paper shows that the racial divisions in the USA have resulted in one community privileged as the object of efforts to build consent. The very investment in maintaining racially pure geographic communities has articulated with common-sense equations of 'American' with white skin among a majority of whites in ways that stretch back to days of slavery and genocide, and that transcend class alliances to maintain white hegemony. This common sense is encoded not just in ideology but also in space, and is key to the dynamic of privileging whites while other communities continue to be segregated and subjected to hegemony's more intensive forms of physical coercion. Just as the value of money can sometimes depend on the colour of one's skin when it comes time to buy a home, so, too, certain lives have not been treated as of equal value in the defence of white property and privilege. This explains the overpowering

role of coercion made visible by the prominent role that violence has played in maintaining the boundaries of race and neighbourhood space subject to a long war of position, and tragically brought to visible life in death after death of men, women and children of colour at the hands of security forces and vigilantes. It continues to be the key dynamic in the return of capital to communities of colour.

This wider callousness towards life has also been widely documented by important work carried out by grass-roots groups involved in struggles for social and environmental justice, as well as the academic work that has helped theorise and support that struggle on the spatialities of white privilege and pollution (Bullard 2007; Powell 2007). In particular, Laura Pulido's work on LA brings together critical race and geography studies, connecting a strong spatial understanding with theories of white privilege and investment. She writes:

'White privilege, as a form of racism, is spatially expressed, indeed it is partially contingent upon a particular set of spatial arrangements. Take the case of neighborhoods. The full exploitation of white privilege requires the production of places with a very high proportion of white people.' (Pulido 2000, 16)

White neighbourhoods are amenity rich, with good schools, clean air, parks, quality food markets—things absent from other neighbourhoods. Ultimately the exclusion of peoples of colour from physical communities and their resources articulates with their exclusion from social constructions of community and its rights and privileges. Both have been subjects of continual struggle, and communities of colour have won a number of significant victories yet still have not succeeded in bringing the walls down. LA embodies the way that these dynamics have shaped fragmented, sprawling cities of desperate racial and class inequality. Its very form, unsustainable and unworkable though it is in every other sense, does work to preserve

white privilege and common-sense ideas founded in lived experience of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Los Angeles

The foundation of the connection between race and land’s market value lies in a history of genocide and conquest—white supremacy’s driving impulses have been refined in more recent times as legal instruments developed to preserve white areas as white into perpetuity. California politicians pioneered protective zoning to protect white spaces, although the state court struck down their attempts to use zoning to limit Chinese residence in 1892 (Jones-Correa 2000–2001). Unable to thus enforce racial restrictions through city regulations, property owners turned to covenants attached to property deeds. The first such covenant probably dated from 1900; it restricted property against ‘sales or transfers to Negroes or Mongolians or persons of Asiatic blood’ (Tyler 1945). Restrictive covenants became widespread; through their use lawyer Miller (1955) estimated that between 1934 and 1950, 98% of all new suburban tracts in LA were for whites only.

The institutionalisation of racial criteria—and Jim Crow—into the appraisal of properties for federal government subsidies and mortgage finance through the 1930s has been well documented. It enshrined race as perhaps *the* primary factor in official evaluations of land’s exchange value (Freund 2007). The federal government formed the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933 in response to the mass foreclosure of the Great Depression. Its guidelines for appraisal were used to colour code urban neighbourhoods across the country with green most desirable and red least:

‘Green areas are “hot spots” ... In nearly all instances they are the new well planned sections of the city ... They are homogeneous; in demand ...
Red areas ... are characterized by detrimental influences in a pronounced degree,

undesirable population or infiltration of it ... The areas are broader than the so-called slum districts.’ (‘Testbed for the Redlining Archives of California’s Exclusionary Spaces,’ n.d.)

While the HOLC itself made loans to homeowners across all colour designations, its successor the Federal Housing Association (FHA) restricted most loans to green or blue areas, that is, new builds with white owners (Freund 2007). The FHA’s 1936 underwriting manual states:

‘If a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally leads to instability and a reduction in values.’ (United States Federal Housing Administration, April 1936, 233)

Banks used these maps and followed these patterns, and such ‘redlining’ practices continue today, long past the discarding of such openly racist rhetoric (Bell 2007).

These were legal and policy definitions of value set up to create and protect white-only communities, and they were defended on the levels of law and policy, the regulatory framework of the real estate profession and by homeowners. Important to remember is that realtors and developers key to the formation of policy themselves lived in white neighbourhoods and were members of homeowner associations to protect their own homes and families; there were no solid boundaries between use and exchange value, personal and professional ‘ethics’ (Gibbons 2014).

Figure 1 helps to better understand the connections between historical struggle against these practices and current patterns of occupation. The colour blocks show concentrations of the African-American population from 1890 to 2010. Through my research I have developed an extensive (though by no means complete) database of addresses where racial incidents centred on property disputes took place, which I have titled ‘contested spaces’. Each circle

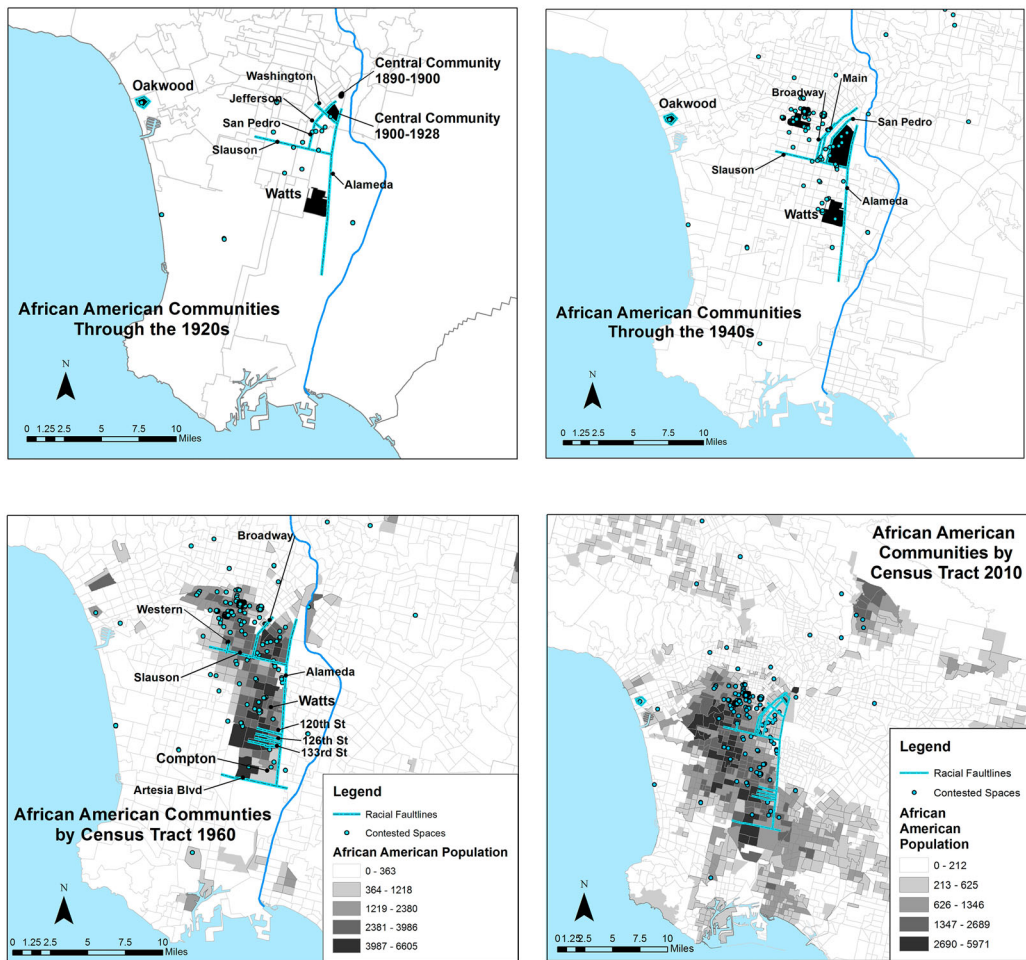


Figure 1 LA's African-American population from 1890 to 2010, mapped against points of contestation and showing shifting racial faultlines (Gibbons 2014).

represents an African-American family who encountered white resistance to their presence, ranging from lawsuits to threats, and from burning crosses to bomb attacks. Each thick straight line represents what I call a 'racial faultline', or recognised boundary between white and black neighbourhoods as these have changed over time. This series of maps shows in simplified form how African Americans have remained highly concentrated in LA, and adjacent to or occupying many of the same areas that they have fought for historically. The highest

concentration, and emblematic of how incarceration has increasingly been used to control the African-American population, lies just north of downtown in a major prison complex.

White neighbourhood associations formed to police these white boundaries and enforce racial covenants. Their discourses of justification illustrate perfectly how preservation of use values and social privilege afforded by schools and amenities sat alongside the preservation of property values. This is recorded from the Fremont Improvement Association:

'Since time began and people found it necessary to associate or live together, organization for political and economic convenience has been necessary if community progress and stability are to be maintained.

The Fremont Improvement Association is organized for the general welfare of the district radiating from the wonderful Fremont High School, particularly south of Slauson from Hooper to Main Street. Much has been accomplished, but much must yet be accomplished.

The integrity of our homes is endangered. We must preserve the schools and district for our own race. The safe guarding of all property against the encroachment of the Negro and Mongolian races into the district is our most urgent work. Your co-operation and membership in the Association is necessary—it is your Association—you owe it to yourself and the community in which you are a vital part to join and give all possible assistance in keeping your district WHITE.'(CE, December 10, 1926)

In 1940, Fremont High School would host a bonfire and symbolic lynching along with distribution of a vile handwritten flyer titled 'No Niggers' (Bass 1960). Organising themselves neighbourhood by neighbourhood to restrict their properties, whites clearly saw themselves as engaged in a kind of war to preserve their rights through these years. An announcement from the president of the Citizens and Taxpayers Protective League, Inc. of the West Jefferson District makes this very clear:

'Prominent citizens have contributed their time and money towards this cause, which has been the most difficult problem of the West Jefferson district. ...

At this time the battle between members of the Caucasian race and the Ethiopians residing in the district waged subtly but nevertheless furiously. Strange marks and crosses appeared on the doors and on sidewalks in front of residences occupied by whites. Both races were guilty of making threats to the other in a desperate effort to make the neighbourhood a one race community.'(CE, September 2, 1927)

Local homeowner efforts were supported at a city-wide level, again the *California Eagle* quotes from the *Pasadena Independent* dated 14 October 1939:

'Opening gun in a city-wide campaign to end racial conflict in Pasadena was fired yesterday when the board of directors of the Chamber of Commerce endorsed 100 per cent the race Restriction program of the Pasadena Improvement Association.

The Chamber's action follows on the heels of similar moves by virtually every area community in the west end of the San Gabriel Valley. ...'(CE, October 19, 1939)

During the Second World War, a strong civil rights movement with support from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and neighbourhood organising were able to take advantage of the country's fight against fascism and desired international role as a defender of democracy to bring an end to covenants through two key cases in the Supreme Court in 1948 and 1954 (Gibbons 2014). The African-American community took advantage of this crack in the walls of white hegemony to expand beyond its earlier racial boundaries in LA. Unable to turn to a legal solution, white homeowner associations continued to organise themselves in other ways to preserve white spatial hegemony. The words of just one of these groups exposes how this struggle solidified identity both as a member of a certain race and a certain community:

'This experience has drawn us much closer together in Leimert Park. We had to buy up one piece of property and we're going to sue the person who sold it to a Negro. There are a lot of constructive things that we can do now that we are organized ... We chose the name Neighborly Endeavors, Inc. because we realize that it is only through loving our neighbors that we are going to be able to protect our community.'(JAF Box 76)

Such 'civilised' responses were kept in minutes, but LA had its share of bombings,

arson attacks, shootings, cross-burnings and everyday aggressions (Gibbons 2014). Meanwhile, the California Real Estate Association pledged itself to do everything possible to maintain white neighbourhoods, publishing the following statement:

'The magnitude of the economic and social loss with which we are confronted is appalling. The widespread depreciation in value of homes, the instability of home ownership, and the discouragement of construction and acquisition of homes are conditions that menace the family life of the nation as we have enjoyed it in the past. Additionally, the insistence of some Negroes upon moving into areas previously restricted exclusively to the occupancy of Caucasians will necessarily create racial tensions and antagonisms and do much harm to our nation's social structure.' (*California Real Estate Magazine*, September 1948)

A real estate textbook published in 1949 quotes extensively from a Glendale real estate broker in describing the process to be followed for maintaining neighbourhoods white:

'The president of a real estate board can arrange for a meeting of a small group of persons interested in helping to solve this problem locally. To this meeting invite persons representing each of such groups as: the real estate board, real estate brokers not members of the board, the local lending agencies, the chamber of commerce, the merchants association, and the planning commission. At this meeting the problem can be discussed and a general planning committee can be appointed to work out a long-range plan whereby certain portions of the community will be designated, and agreed upon by those interested, as most suitable for the residence of nonwhites ... The value of real estate depends upon its salability, or marketability. ... Maximum desirability of residential property depends importantly upon the neighbors being harmonious.' (McMichael 1949, 208–209)

This highlights the connection between developers and planners, marketability and whiteness that shaped the massive post-war building subsidised by the federal government (Weiss 1987).

Such tactics were further developed in resistance to pressure from the growing civil rights movement through the 1950s and 1960s to force integration of all-white suburbs carried out by groups like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The form of this resistance is illustrated particularly well through CORE's two-year campaign against developer Don Wilson, a 'community builder' who created multiple subdivisions and built tens of thousands of homes in the southern suburbs of LA. His business practice of creating different developments for different races exploited to the full the spatialisation of the city's racial hierarchies—while selling homes to whites only in Torrance, in Dominguez Hills he sold homes to Asians, Mexicans and whites. For African Americans, as a response to the pressure of CORE's campaign, he completed a development near Compton. Nothing could be more emblematic of the racialised and spatialised rationalities of segregation. These developments all contained similar homes at similar prices, they only differed in the size of the deposit required—able to be raised or lowered by the developer depending on the suitability of the family. Despite the pressure of regular pickets, hundreds of arrests, marches of thousands of people and high profile coverage generated by support from Hollywood stars like Marlon Brando, Torrance remained white (Gibbons 2014).

Black-owned newspaper the *Sentinel* published an article written as a first-person narrative of one of the large marches:

'Across the street, on the corners ahead, unsympathetic white crowds waited ... Half-naked white youth sent up a chorus of boos. "Don't you get the message? We don't want you here", shouted a man.' (July 4, 1963)

Another article notes a group of neighbourhood youth reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the marchers. Signs stated 'Without property rights there are no human rights' and 'We have civil rights too' (*Sentinel*, June 30, 1963). In the aftermath of the protest, a family returned to their car to find all of the windows smashed, and that evening a sniper shot three bullets through the plate glass window at CORE headquarters while people were still inside (*Sentinel*, July 4, 1963). A statement from the Homeowner's Association shows how the rhetoric has moved from earlier kinds of openly expressed racist sentiment, yet with no shift in the idea that racial harmony consists of people of colour leaving them alone in their privileged neighbourhoods:

'We are fed up with them and with their tactics. We want for ourselves the same civil rights they claim to be demonstrating for. We want to be left alone to enjoy our homes and our families. Is that too much to ask?' (*Press*, July 31, 1963)

An *LA Times* article gives a more revealing view into what lies behind this new discourse. It opens with the reactions of tract residents describing children playing a new game: picketing. An angry mother blames the mass protests for 'disturbing our children, upsetting our lives and changes our way of thinking about Negroes' (Neff, August 4, 1963). Torrance City Council ultimately passed a city resolution closing the entire neighbourhood to strangers—essentially gating the community. Ultimately this forced CORE to discontinue direct action in favour of what would prove a fruitless effort through the courts.

This white victory in Torrance showed just what could be achieved through the privatisation of streets and cooperation between developers, city officials and the police in protecting white space. Other developers were taking note, as showed by a meeting of major developers and funders convened by the Home Savings & Loan Association after CORE expanded their picketing of Wilson to his lenders' offices (Abrahamson 2013).

Academics and professionals responded to anti-discrimination legislation with a symposium on how to defend themselves against 'forced housing'. One author wrote:

'The Jewish middle class and the rapidly growing Negro middle class eagerly pursue these values and aspirations, and this pursuit inevitably leads them to suburbia. However, their presence in suburbia is inimical to the status needs and values of many who are (or who can more easily pass as) "old American". In fact, their presence is often inimical to the very image of what a suburban community should be like.' (Fishman 1963, 136)

This openly states the intertwining of value, status and ideal community space being created and sold to maximise real estate profit.

The clearest long-term strategy for preserving privileged space has been putting control of streets and public spaces into resident hands. In any Common Interest Development, or CID, a homeowner association could shut down their streets in the same way that Torrance did, without requiring a city ordinance and police. In CIDs individuals own their own homes and hold in common the development's streets, amenities and public spaces. Membership in the self-taxing homeowners' association is mandatory (McKenzie 1994). One government source reported that the new phenomenon of CIDs 'probably accounts for the most significant privatisation of US local government responsibilities this century' (ACIR 1989, 18).

Fewer than 500 of these associations existed in 1964. By 1970, this number had skyrocketed to 10,000. By 1992, 150,000 associations governed an estimated 32 million Americans, and homes within CIDs composed 11% of the housing stock (McKenzie 1994). These numbers reflect both the enormous amounts of surplus capital being channelled into suburban real estate development through this period, and its rigorous control as white privileged space. It is not just neighbourhoods that were sectioned off from the city. Miller

(1981) describes how suburban areas protected their tax bases and ensured control over their public spaces through municipal incorporation over this same period—LA County now contains 88 incorporated cities and multiple unincorporated areas. Returning to Lefebvre (1991), ‘Capitalism has taken possession of the land, and *mobilized* it to the point where this sector is fast becoming *central*... Capitalism has thus rushed into the production of space’ (335). Importantly for Lefebvre (1996) this has been production of social space, the selling of home as a ‘place of privilege’ and ‘place of happiness’ (84). In LA this has meant protected and homogenous white space.

This is visible in the ways that higher property values and whiteness coincide across suburbia (Ethington, Frey, and Myers 2001) as well as how the more recent return of capital to the centre city has brought with it the mass displacement of the poor and communities of colour. Even LA had to hit limits of infrastructure, commuting distances and land itself. As Harvey (2007) and Smith (1982) describe, the process of uneven development has made the failing infrastructure of the centre city a fertile ground for redevelopment, where the rent gap has been steadily growing. The unbroken link between race and value has meant that no physical depreciation is necessary for the existence of a ‘rent gap’ in communities of colour, but of course redlining practices, the withdrawal of resources, the practices of absentee landlords and the like have also been pivotal in placing capital’s spatial fix.

While some of the new loft marketing discourse has focused on selling points such as ‘live where you work’ and the excitement of the big city, in both discourse and practice it has retained key features developed through decades of white struggle: defensible exclusivity; homogeneity; security; narrow definitions of community and responsibility; and increasingly privatised controls over public areas (Gibbons 2014; Smith 1996). Above all, it has tried to replicate the white spaces so necessary to the social reproduction

of white privilege. This can be seen throughout the transformation of skid row, and the struggle to convert a neighbourhood where non-profit development corporations were once able to purchase and rehabilitate large hotels as single room occupancies (SROs) and halfway houses, to a centre of luxury loft building where property values have risen over 200% since 1999 (Downtown Central Business Improvement District 2013).

Historically, skid row represented an open policy of segregation. Don Spivack (1988) of the Community Redevelopment Agency summarised the city’s formal policy as follows:

‘The decision was made with the adoption of the redevelopment plan in 1975 that the program in Central City East would be to try to stabilize it ... following a policy that was subsequently referred to as a “Policy of Containment”. The containment idea was not so much that you put a fence around Skid Row to keep people in, but you designate an area in which facilities and services will be encouraged to centralize and exist ...’

Despite the focus on services, there is no getting away from the use of the title ‘policy of containment’. By 2012, almost half of those homeless in LA—over 50,000 people in conservative estimates—were African American, forming a majority in skid row (Wagner and White 2012). The primary reason for this lies in LA’s massive deindustrialisation and the widespread closure of factories and industry through the processes of globalisation, deinstitutionalisation and the dismantling of North America’s limited welfare state, and the ways in which this hit the African-American community the hardest (Wolch 1996). Containment failed to provide any kind of real solution to homelessness as it failed to grapple with its underlying causes, but it did provide some level of housing, services and space for community.

The return of capital to LA’s centre has worked to destroy what little support remains without providing alternatives,

converting residential hotels and offices into luxury apartments despite the desperate and growing need for affordable housing. The Los Angeles Housing Department estimated that between 1995 and 2003, 10 SRO hotels were converted, with a net loss of 1087 units (Los Angeles Housing Department 2005). The cost of lofts and condos went from an average of \$198 per square foot in 2000 to \$487 in 2013 despite the economic crisis (Downtown Central Business Improvement District 2013). One solitary square foot of the new housing being created thus cost more than double the monthly income issued to a downtown resident through General Relief. A demographic survey of the new loft dwellers moving into downtown showed the majority to be between the ages of 23 and 29, and heavily 'young professionals'. Of these, 57.9% were Caucasian, with the next highest ethnicity Asian/Pacific Islander at 17.1%. Arguably this could be a parallel to Don Wilson's building of three separate tracts of housing for different groups—a slight opening of the more privileged community to those groups higher up within the racial hierarchy. The median income of these new residents was almost \$90,000, close to 8% earned over \$200,000 (Downtown Central Business Improvement District 2011).

Examination of *DTLA Life*, a glossy magazine geared to downtown's new residents and published by LA Lofts Realty, reveals the importance of exclusivity and luxury as the primary themes. A shop/gallery space opening on the top floor of a downtown skyscraper and calling itself 'Please Do Not Enter' is described as 'A new kind of *private* space. ... Please Do Not Enter invites a particular community to discover an eclectic array of exclusive, carefully selected and timeless goods' (*DTLA Life* 2014). Lofts are pictured as fully self-contained with pool, spa and gym, the other skyscrapers of downtown their only background.

The CEO of the Central City Association, and the Business Improvement District (BID) that it runs, notes another key aspect of

downtown's development tied into the macro-circuits of capital:

'We also have a community that basically supports growth. People don't live Downtown unless they can handle commercial activity, noise, and all the things you find in the center of a big city. That all portends very well for development because we're not seeing the kind of no-growth behavior that you see in other markets in Los Angeles.' (CCA's Carol Schatz on LA's downtown development boom, *Downtown News* 2012)

To have wealthy people not just willing to live in high-density environments but be supportive of further development has been a dream come true after decades of fighting the rise of the slow-to-no-growth movement among suburban homeowners looking to protect their home values as documented by Davis (2006). It is significant that business identified the only check to expansionary growth in the downtown area as the poor and the people of colour.

The Central City Association (CCA) and the Central City East Association (CCEA) spearheaded this return of capital to the downtown area. From the time of its incorporation, the CCEA conducted a hard push to 'clean up' the streets, lobbying the city and working with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and other city agencies to conduct sweeps of the area targeting homeless encampments (Clifford and McMillan 1987). It had formed two BIDs by 1999, providing private security and additional cleaning and beautification services to businesses and the new residents. Pete White (2000) of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN) explained the ways in which BIDs were able to occupy and control space through coercion:

'Prior to the formation of the BIDs residents could move about as they pleased if the activity was lawful. Now such basic social interactions as resting for a spell on a street corner, eating lunch on a curb, or just

standing on the street having a conversation with a friend result in hassle from Business Improvement Districts.’(96)

That same year, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit, *Cervantes v. International Services, Inc.* The ‘suit, the first of its kind in the nation, alleges that downtown property owners, through their support of the business improvement districts, bankrolled a “systematic, concerted campaign” to chase homeless people off public property in violation of their civil liberties’ and that ‘guards intimidated and harassed homeless individuals through illegal searches, seizures, detentions, and threats in an effort to coerce the individuals into leaving the BID’ (NLCHP and NCH 2009).

In addition to increasing security activities they could directly control through increased numbers of officers, clean-up crews and aggressive patrols by the BIDs they directed, the CCA and CCEA also helped create political will and drove coordinated political action to promote a newly enforced rhetoric of public safety and health. This demanded the eradication of any homeless presence through the attempted introduction of new public health ordinances effectively making homelessness illegal. They also worked to achieve the private and public transformation of existing buildings into lofts and boutique hotels to displace more long-term and stable low-income tenants in housing, aided by a new downtown redevelopment plan. But after a major activist victory to preserve over 10,000 units in residential hotels, their tactics shifted. As a LACAN activist noted,

‘every for profit hotel pulled some kind of scam to illegally evict tenants so they could jump into the loft-building craze, that’s what they wanted to do, and when we won that housing preservation ordinance, that preserved the housing for the next 50 years, the first thing that come out they mouth again was ok, well you won your housing, but when you come out your housing, come out in the streets, we got Sergeant Crook and Lieutenant Paulson right here that’s going to

throw you up against the wall, you better be straight, you going to jail’.(Focus Group 2012)

This ushered in the third prong of the CCEA and CCA offensive, which consisted of fighting for LAPD’s Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) and drug enforcement policies. These concentrated more than 50 police within skid row to focus on ‘quality of life’ issues, with additional massive sweeps by narcotics and parole officers. In the first year of SCI 12,000 citations were issued, averaging 1000 a month, with a majority being for pedestrian violations. Thousands of low-income residents found themselves with arrest warrants, newly criminalised if they had not been arrested before. SCI also averaged about 750 arrests per month on other quality-of-life violations (Blasi et al. 2007).

In 2005, the CCEA had started regular walks through the neighbourhood. Their CEO authored an editorial in the *Downtown News* titled ‘Walk With Us: Taking Back the Streets of Skid Row Requires a Community Effort’ (*Los Angeles Downtown News*, August 1, 2005). This march demanding increased police enforcement drew a line that included those of wealth and privilege who felt the police were there to protect them as part of the ‘community’, while excluding the poor and people of colour being harassed, arrested, beaten and killed by the LAPD. SCI represented more than lines of cops marching down the street; it meant occupation (amongst many such references, see *Community Connection*, December 2008). LACAN member Deborah Burton testified how the police enforced geographical and racial lines of community before the City Council on 29 September 2009:

‘I used to feel safe in my community, but since the safer city initiative was placed in 2006, I don’t feel safe anymore. I don’t feel safe as I walk to my home or my job. Walking in my community is like walking in a minefield. You don’t know when five or six police are going to jump out at you, throw you against the

wall, put you in handcuffs, search you, and then let you go. . . . I feel like just because we're black and live in the downtown community, I'm a criminal.³

This is the brutal face of domination and racial cleansing in service of rising real estate values based on an underlying understanding of value formed over decades of struggle to preserve white communities and privilege. The wider community's passivity in the face of such abuses of human rights is only another aspect of the slow violence the people of skid row face in their struggle to maintain their place in the city.

Conclusions

Over many years white supremacy has been cemented into the fabric of the city through the links between land's use and exchange value, white hegemonic space and white privilege. Examining the ongoing connection between skin colour and land value, and the extraordinary efforts to create and maintain homogenous and privileged white space in both the suburbs and the central city, show that: (1) racism lies at the heart of both sprawl and the increasingly privatised and fragmented form that the city has taken; (2) the struggle to maintain this segregation of physical communities has articulated over time with ideas of belonging and definitions of 'us' and 'them', facilitating and legitimating violence against people of colour; (3) this ongoing violence in defence of white spatial privilege continues to be central to broader dynamics of violence against communities of colour as well as the social cleansing being driven by capital's investment in rebuilding city centres.

The link between property values and defensible homogenous white space forged through so many years of defending white communities against the 'invasion' of people of colour now informs the reversal of real estate capital in its drive to racially cleanse downtown of its long-time residents through efforts to rebuild for a new

community. The impossibility of imagining value in redeveloping the centre for an existing community of the poor and people of colour reinforces just how powerful real estate logics of profit, whiteness and property values have become. The violent mobilisation of the SCI and criminalisation of homelessness in LA to facilitate the creation of privileged space also shows how these logics both leverage and contribute to a broader criminalisation of poor people of colour, what Alexander (2012) describes so eloquently as the new Jim Crow. Multiple deaths, and the struggle to ensure that #BlackLivesMatter, highlight this state violence, just as a broad refusal to acknowledge the justice of such a campaign highlights limited white definitions of the community as 'us', and the protected role of the police in their use of force against those excluded from it. The bleakness of this present is already working to define the new segregated lines of our future. Ever greater social and environmental catastrophes lie in the mass displacement of people of colour and the poor to the city's most run-down and polluted margins, where lives become harder to hold together at an ever greater distance from new amenities and public transportation networks.

Above all, this paper argues that anti-racist theorising cannot remain peripheral to critical work on the city, or our visions of creating a better future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

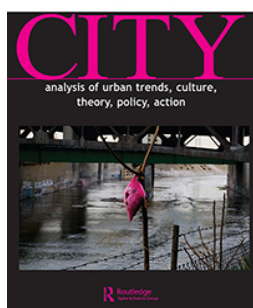
- 1 For more on racial hierarchies, see, among others, Almaguer (1994), Kurashige (2008) and Pulido (2000, 2006).
- 2 Gibbons (forthcoming).
- 3 Video can be found online at: http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=&clip_id=6784&caption_id=9554960 (accessed 16 March 2013).

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The incredible shrinking Japan

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The incredible shrinking Japan

Cinematic representations of urban decline

Fernando Ortiz-Moya  and Nieves Moreno 

Growth and shrinkage are two sides of the same coin—global restructuring of the capital that produces geographies of unequal urban development. This new reality goes beyond the attention of academics and policymakers, and is becoming a common narrative in Japanese cinema. This paper explores how Japanese contemporary filmmakers portray the problems associated with shrinkage, such as urban decay or the social and economic restructuring processes in Japan, disseminating it to a wider audience. This research study analyses two Japanese film-texts—Kazuyoshi Kumakiri's Sketches of Kaitan City (2010) and Sand-Il Lee's Hula Girls (2006)—which serve to illustrate current trends of both Japanese urban shrinkage and cinema. The main objective underlying this analysis is to stress the relationship between cinema and urban space; and how the cinematic vision of cities helps to understand the complex socio-spatial processes from contemporary urban transformations.

Key words: shrinking city, cinema, globalisation, Japan, urban decay

Introduction

A shrinking city is ‘an urban area that has experienced population loss, economic downturn and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis’ (Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2013, 14; cited after Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012a). Shrinking cities are becoming a popular topic, not only in academic debates but also in common media, policymaking or cultural and artistic expressions. Although throughout history, many cities have diminished in importance, or even disappeared, due to diverse causes—be it wars, plagues, natural disasters or political transformations—the current process of urban shrinkage differs in nature and reach (Rieniets 2009). Urban shrinkage captures the new characteristics of decay processes—

that is, its global socio-political dimension and the synergic relationships between its causes. The different processes¹ that cause population and economic decline are all anchored in the global re-spatialisation of the capital, which creates a dual system based on the concentration and de-concentration of population and economic resources.

The problems associated with shrinkage have been considered from disciplines related to urban and social studies as well as economic or political approaches. In current debates, ‘shrinking cities and regions are predominantly characterised by the means of images, episodes and statistics’ (Jessen 2012, 46). Population and economic data show the inevitable fate of these cities, depicting a city’s economic worsening, its declining industries and job losses that provoke out-

migration. Images of empty buildings in states of ruin, vacant lots and derelict spaces are frequently used to illustrate urban shrinkage. The power of images generated by shrinkage also attracted the attention of filmmakers who translate the decaying spaces to an audience outside the field of expertise in order to disseminate the social challenges of those populations. This kind of response is, sometimes, overlooked in academic debates; nevertheless, the exploration of shrinking cities through visual images can open the door to new ways of understanding cities.

This paper aims to look at this reality from a cinematic perspective, exploring how shrinking cities are conveyed in films. Cinema is able to represent cities in a way that makes the audience cinematically experience the urban realm (Hubbard 2006), having the power to raise awareness of previously unnoticed aspects of the world (Hansen 1987). Through cinema, we aim to explore the human side of urban shrinkage. Here, films operate as multi-task tools. Firstly, they remind us of the social issues that are derived from urban decay and are important enough to be motives in common culture. Secondly, cinema, by its nature, must exhibit places to its spectators for concrete actions and thoughts, making filmmakers consider ways of conveying space as a film character. Thus, we have to consider the artistic representation of this problem. The work of filmmakers usually shows us how the place of the moving image is also the place of a human subjectivity not always provided by other disciplines. This paper focuses on the socio-economic processes that cause urban shrinkage. Nevertheless, cinematic representations of these processes can help to understand global restructuring processes and how they may affect people.

The relationship between urban and cinematic spaces has helped to confront urban and social development from a cultural perspective (Kracauer 1960). Through the discussion of two film-texts, we explore the social processes derived from conflicts generated by the global restructuring of the

economy, which ultimately is driving the urban shrinkage globally. These two film-texts² are Kazuyoshi Kumakiri's *Sketches of Kaitan City* (Kaitanshi Jokei, 2010) and Sang-Il Lee's *Hula Girls* (Fura Gâru, 2006). Since the late 1990s, an increasing number of Japanese filmmakers show the social problems arising in peripheral areas. As a result of this, many decaying industrial cities, rural areas and second-tier cities have become the subject of several movies. Nevertheless, rather than fetishising urban decay motives like in the 'ruin porn' photography or films (Arnold 2015; Lavery and Hassall 2015), these film-texts tackle the social issues provoked by contemporary capitalism, and in particular, those of shrinking cities, by closely looking to the social cost of urban decay.

As Martin (2011) points out, 'local geographies have been inextricably linked to and constitutive of global processes' (589) and therefore, we assume that shrinking cities are the outcome of the deconstruction and reconstitution of the global contemporary economic and societal values. This has fostered the appearance of an unequal geography of growth and shrinkage. Our two film-texts underline the relationship that exists between local geographical contexts and global processes. The local geographies of the cities portrayed in *Sketches of Kaitan City* and *Hula Girls* are changing due to global processes; Kumakiri and Sang-Il chose to depict the social consequences of the urban transformation from different viewpoints. Unsurprisingly, their approaches enable spectators to connect with the seemingly remote problems of urban shrinkage.

The remainder of this paper first gives an overview of the literature on shrinking cities and explains the context of Japan in relation to that literature. Then it goes on to explore how the relation of cinema and film studies can help the better understanding of shrinking cities. It continues by discussing each film-text in detail and relating them to wider theoretical issues. Finally, the authors make some comments on how

cinematic readings of shrinking cities can expand debates on processes of urban transformations.

An approach to urban shrinkage

Although urban shrinkage is not a new phenomenon, its establishment as an academic discipline is relatively recent (Haase et al. 2014; Sousa and Pinho 2015). Nevertheless, prior to becoming a field of study in its own right, scholars researched the apparent decay of urban areas. As early as 1944, Wirth (1944) pointed out that the growth of American cities was slowing down. Three years later, Walker (1947) stated that American cities were in fact ‘shrinking’.³ The reality of urban decay pressed scholars to approach the problem, questioning the nature and causes of this new urban condition. Literature on urban decay emerged during the 1960s in those countries where the symptoms were already evident—namely, the USA and Western European countries. The range of these studies was diverse, but covered many of the recurrent topics that are still central to the research on shrinking cities. It includes investigations in suburbanisation and the hollowing out of central cities (Jacobs 1993; Whyte 1958), racial issues and ghetto narratives (Abrams 1965; Clark 1965; Thomas 1967), deindustrialisation and the changes in employment (Bell 1976; Bluestone and Harrison 1982), and work on population distribution patterns from a quantitative approach (Berry 1976; Hall and Hay 1980; van den Berg et al. 1982). Drawing on this literature, it is possible to realise how the socio-economic changes were transforming the urban realm and the emergence of new challenges for cities.

During the 1970s, the shrinking cities scholarship appeared in Germany (Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2013). This first wave of research on shrinking cities provided the ground for the subsequent work of the Shrinking Cities Project—initiated in 2001 by the German Federal Cultural Foundation—and the

origin of the current understanding of urban shrinkage. The appearance of the term ‘shrinking city’ allowed the creation of wider synergic links between disconnected bodies of literature in order to grasp the complexity of contemporary processes of urban decay. Since then, a range of scholars and research groups have approached the study of urban shrinkage from different perspectives (Dewar and Thomas 2013; Ganser and Piro 2012; Oswalt 2005, 2006; Pallagst et al. 2013; Richardson and Nam 2014). Although each of these works on urban shrinkage nuances their understanding of urban shrinkage—at the spatial level, or in terms of the period of decline—they all identify shrinking cities as urban areas that are losing population and economic activity due to a structural transformation of their socio-economic fabric. Yet, as it has been noted elsewhere, the study of shrinking cities still lacks a holistic theoretical framework (Großmann et al. 2013; Haase et al. 2014; Sousa and Pinho 2015).

Rather than defining urban shrinkage as the mere decline in population and economic activity in an urban area for a certain period of time (Delken 2008; Schilling and Logan 2008; Wiechmann 2008), we understand urban shrinkage as the spatialisation of the ongoing structural changes of capitalism, which results in the re-localisation of population and economic activity (Harvey 2001). This approach allows us to focus on the causes and effects of the socio-economic transformations that cause urban shrinkage, and primarily on the human side of urban decay processes. Our approach to urban shrinkage is grounded in two different theoretical standpoints. Firstly, in the post-industrial theory that emerged since the 1960s and their different sub-branches, for example, globalisation, post-Fordism, the information society (Kumar 2005); and secondly, in Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the production of space. Through the combination of both theoretical strands we aim to create a holistic approach to the study of urban development, whether growth or shrinkage,

which will serve as the backbone to the subsequent analysis of the studied two film-texts.

Crises are embedded in capitalism's own cyclical nature where destruction and reconstruction succeed each other in order to relentlessly seek profits (Harvey 2014; Marcuse 2009). This new stage of capitalism's development, therefore, is characterised by the rise of information technologies that ultimately decrease physical distance—due to the annihilation of space through time—and the place dependency of production facilities (Harvey 2014). The symptoms of this transformation are the new division of labour (Lipietz 1997), progressive deindustrialisation, the shift to tertiary activities (Amin 1994a; Blackaby 1986; Bluestone and Harrison 1982) and the rise of global cities (Friedmann 1986; Sassen 2001). Different branches of the post-industrial theory have similar implications for the study of urban shrinkage; they agree in the progressive growth of socio-economic inequalities between a core area that concentrates economic functions—and therefore population—and a periphery that loses those same assets (Harvey 1990, 2014; Scott 2012; Smith 2008).

In most works on the post-industrial society, socio-economic changes are translated into spatial transformations. Indeed, social relations need to be linked to a particular place in space; and hence, societies are required to produce that space (Lefebvre 1991). For Lefebvre, space is a social product, and as a product, society needs to produce this, following the rules marked by the dominant economic system of a particular epoch. Therefore, space is bound to a place, a time and a mode of production. Furthermore, space has material or physical qualities, as he understood production not only as the manufacturing of goods but also as works in the built environment that coded and spatialised social relations (Lefebvre 1991). When capital evolves, it creates new spatial forms according to its new mode of production. This process takes place through the destruction and reconfiguration of the elements that

fix capital to space (Harvey 2001). The result has been the progressive growth of inequalities between cities that are able to connect to global networks of information, and cities that remain disconnected from those same networks (Castells 2010; Harvey 2001; Sassen 2001). Uneven spatial development and the capital both go hand in hand (Smith 2008); therefore, urbanisation and shrinkage are two interconnected sides of the spatialisation of the current stage of capitalism. The volatile character of capital triggered the multiplication of shrinking cities—as disconnected locations easily lose economic resources generating out-migration (Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2013). The notion of creative destruction—implying capital's everlasting process of destruction of old modes and assets of production through the creation of new ones in its quest for profits (Berman 1982; Harvey 2010)—is therefore in place in spatial terms being the driving force of urban shrinkage.

In this mood of consensus, we understand that shrinking cities are the spaces that can no longer underpin the socio-economic functions of the current mode of capitalist production. They cannot adjust themselves to meet the necessities of the current economic system and therefore, their worsened economic conditions create the exodus of population to places that are engaged with current capitalist economic activities.

Capital spatialisation and shrinking cities in Japan

Despite the particularities of Japanese capitalism⁴ (Crump 2003), the urbanisation process of Japan also sought to maximise profits through the spatialisation of capital. During the last century, Japan transformed itself from a rural to an urbanised country (Nakamura 1993; Sorensen 2002). The speed of this urbanisation process is only comparable to the country's fast economic growth that shaped its urban structure (Sorensen 2002). Industrial areas stretched along the Pacific

coast from Tokyo to Northern Kyushu, concentrating large populations; yet prefectural capitals remained as regional poles of economic activity. However, the centralisation efforts of the Japanese government during the post-war years, provoked the further concentration of economic activities in the so-called Tokaidô megalopolis—the region that encompasses the metropolitan areas of Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka—as those areas already had the necessary infrastructure network to support industrial growth (Gottmann 1976; Miyakawa 1980; Yamaguchi 1984). Yet, this also triggered the decay of peripheral cities (Flüchter 2012; Fujii 2008).

Therefore, capital's spatialisation in Japan has created an imbalanced geographical system. On the one hand, peripheral and rural regions aged due to the exodus of young populations moving to the megalopolis; and on the other hand, the inflow of immigrants supported the fast urban growth of the core urban regions (Iyoda 2010; Tsuya and Kuroda 1989). Nevertheless, the crisis of capital of the 1970s and the subsequent deindustrialisation exacerbated this trend. The Japanese capitalism responded to this crisis through the spatial reorganisation of the urban system; it evolved from the industrial megalopolitan model to a monopolar system that fostered the over-concentration of activity in Tokyo (Fujita and Tabuchi 1997). Previously, flourishing manufacturing cities lost their economic power and started to shrink. Once more, capitalist expansion happened through the annihilation of the physical assets that underpinned capital to space. Population decline continued in rural areas but also extended to small and medium-sized cities. The rise of Tokyo as a global city happened at the expense of other urban areas that turned in to shrinking cities (Flüchter 2012; Kamo 2000).

The island-city of Hashima—known as *Gunkanjima*, or the Battleship Island—serves as an extreme example of how the changing conditions of capitalism also shapes the urban system. The small island, situated near Nagasaki City, developed as a

coal-mining city; the city's population peaked in 1960, when over 5000 people were living there. *Gunkanjima* matured like a small-scale city; it had all the services and utilities needed for modern life, including a school, a kindergarten, a hospital, a supermarket, housing estates and a cinema. The new energy policy promoted by the Japanese government during the 1970s fostered the use of petroleum at the expense of coal. *Gunkanjima*'s mine closed in 1974, and the city was completely abandoned a few months later (Akui et al. 2011; Gouto and Sakamoto 2005). Despite its small scale, *Gunkanjima* illustrates how capital's spatialisation shapes urbanisation. Coal mining transformed the island-city into a centre of capitalist production; the shift towards other sources of energy, however, prompted the closure of the mine. *Gunkanjima* was unable to underpin capital to space; its economy collapsed and pushed away its entire population.

The post-industrial economy also altered Japan's social fabric. New lifestyles and technologies broke the relationship between life and biological cycles (Castells 2010); women's active participation in the workforce delayed age of marriage, and new societal values, which also implied the deconstruction of the traditional nuclear family and changed demographic patterns, with lower birth rates in advanced capitalist nations (Amin 1994b; Castells 2010; Waldby and Cooper 2008). On top of that, medical advancements have increased life expectancy and, consequently, the population is ageing. In Japan, the post-industrial transformation has created a 'double-negative demographic disequilibrium' in peripheral areas, meaning the overlapping of out-migration and negative population growth (Matanle and Rausch 2011).

The cinematic shrinking city: a methodological note

A different urban reality of shrinking cities calls for a distinct analytical perspective.

Previous assumptions about the description of 'urban' lose their validity when facing the complex problems caused by and resulting from urban shrinkage. Shrinking cities, as it has been said of contemporary capitalist expansion (Soja 2000), do not represent a rupture with previous urban development models; rather, they are the necessary restructuring that results from the transition from one phase of economic development to another. This evolution has its effects on the physical, social and economic fabric of the city. Nonetheless, this holistic transformation—as in the urban reality all the different aspects of city life are interconnected—is usually studied in parts, focusing only on particular aspects of different case studies. In this respect, Jessen (2012) argues that the images of shrinking cities shock people living in prosperous growing cities, as they have no previous experience of it. Dissimilar to the romantic perspectives of classical and ancient ruins that took place during Britain's industrialisation (Edensor 2005), images of shrinking cities have been radically used in filmmaking, photography and academia, and focusing on abandoned infrastructures, industrial facilities, schools and houses. This approach shows the extent of the situation, the effects on the physical fabric as a warning of something that could soon happen in any city.

The two studied film-texts embody how the forces of globalisation are spatially manifested and how they have an effect on diverse urban fabrics. Two films are selected to show two different ways to deal with the economic and social problems brought by globalisation, as well as two different approaches to render how society is responding to this new challenge. They are set in two different Japanese shrinking cities. First, *Sketches of Kaitan City* is an independent art-house film set in the northern island of Japan, Hokkaido. This film shows the social consequences of the streamline process of the local shipyards, the main economic driver of the city. Second, *Hula Girls* is a Japanese blockbuster comedy film about a group of young women living in

a coal-mining town in Fukushima prefecture during the 1960s. The film portrays the restructuring process of the Japanese coal-mining industry, after the change in the energy policy of the Japanese government. They offer two contrasting visions of shrinking cities: a negative and hopeless one in *Sketches of Kaitan City* and a more positive one in *Hula Girls*.

Through this analysis, we question the advantages of images over other methods to study the problem of shrinking cities. The places and spaces of production, consumption and representation are fundamental to understand the aesthetic, social, political or cultural adscription of cinema. In this paper, we analyse the visual conception of film space to stress the social conditions that result from economic restructuring processes. Film analysis frequently connects debates from several disciplines—for example, philosophy, urbanism, social and political studies or architecture. Nonetheless, as Harbord (2007) points out, cinema is a 'cross-fertilisation of disciplines' (5). Film, as a popular art in constant evolution (Bordwell 1989), no longer represents a unique system of practices, but rather a cultural object influenced by discourses of social sciences and urban studies. The ability of filmmakers to construct connections between reality and fiction makes film analysis a pertinent instrument through which to examine shrinking cities (Ortiz-Moya and Moreno 2015). Cinema and space share a characteristic that attracts our analysis: both have been understood as real and constructed. Cinema is a photographic art, useful to represent the truth and at the same time, acts as a fictional tool, as a fabricated text. Similarly, space can be understood as nature but also as a human product. Analysing the dual character of cinema and of space and its connections can broaden the debates on urban shrinkage.

This paper evaluates the processes suffered in deindustrialised cities using ideas external to the discipline of urban studies. Films have the facility to bring out situations about social concerns crossing the limits of

cultural, ideological or national identities (McDonald 2006). The films selected here have the ability to capture reality in different ways and with different meanings, leaving an imprint to direct our attention to an apparently non-common problem. Yet, in this paper we cross the disciplinary barriers in order to explore issues that film or urban studies by themselves do not often analyse.

Kaitan City: sketching urban shrinkage

Sketches of Kaitan City represents the 'geographical restructuring of capitalist activity (deindustrialisation here and reindustrialisation there)' (Harvey 2001, 24) brought by contemporary globalisation and its social consequences, which ultimately results in urban shrinkage (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012a). The film is articulated through five independent segments based on five short stories from the homonymous book by Sato Yasushi. Kumakiri picks these five sketches to construct, like a delicate puzzle, a critical reading about the social consequences of the city's economic restructuring. The location is set in Kaitan, a fictional northern industrial town in recession; nevertheless, the film was shot in Hakodate, Hokkaido prefecture, which is undergoing a similar economic decline process (Figures 1 and 2).

The fictional city helps to evoke all of those peripheral cities that are shrinking as a result of the asymmetrical social and urban system where global centres drag economic and human resources from other regions, triggering their decline⁵ (Soja 2013)—or as Castells (2002) describes them, 'the black holes of marginality' (316). The problems described in Kaitan City are similar to those currently being experienced in other Japanese shrinking cities, such as Kochi, Nagasaki or Matsue; once manufacturing activities hollow out, the inhabitants are left behind without prospects for their future. By placing the film not in Hakodate City—where it was actually filmed—but in Kaitan City, Kumakiri is

avoiding creating a direct relation with one single city in order to facilitate spectators to identify their ongoing struggles with those of the characters in the film.

The five sketches chart a group of working-class citizens and how they cope with the depressed city's industry. Kaitan's shipyard, the economic driver of the city, starts its downsizing due to global economic changes in the shipbuilding industry; the result is massive layoffs despite union protests. This process is part of the capitalist expansion through the destruction of previous nodes of production—the so-called creative destruction process, when capital moves to a different geographic location in order to continue its expansion, leaving behind the destruction of the previous node (Harvey 2001). Kumakiri, however, stresses the sorrow and repressed anger of the characters facing this situation in solitude, surrounded by a city that neglects their existence.

Globalisation, and the growth of advanced financial and service activities, needs the decline of other economic sectors to grow (Sassen 2001). In many cases, this decline has been triggered by national policies, which harmed other economic sectors, especially manufacturing industries, in order to assure the future growth of global cities and tertiary activities (Sassen 2001). The spatial reorganisation of capitalist activity is polarising urban systems towards geography of growth and decline: capital is being concentrated in certain poles—the so-called global cities—while it is abandoning other areas, creating inequalities amongst them (Harvey 2001). The sketches reflect this through the downsizing of Kaitan's shipyard (Figure 3); and this process articulates and provides unity to the film. Therefore, the economic transformation of the city becomes the structuring and driving mechanism of the story.

The film moves from one sketch to another without forcing any structural connection because the people of Kaitan City are living in relative isolation. The global disconnection

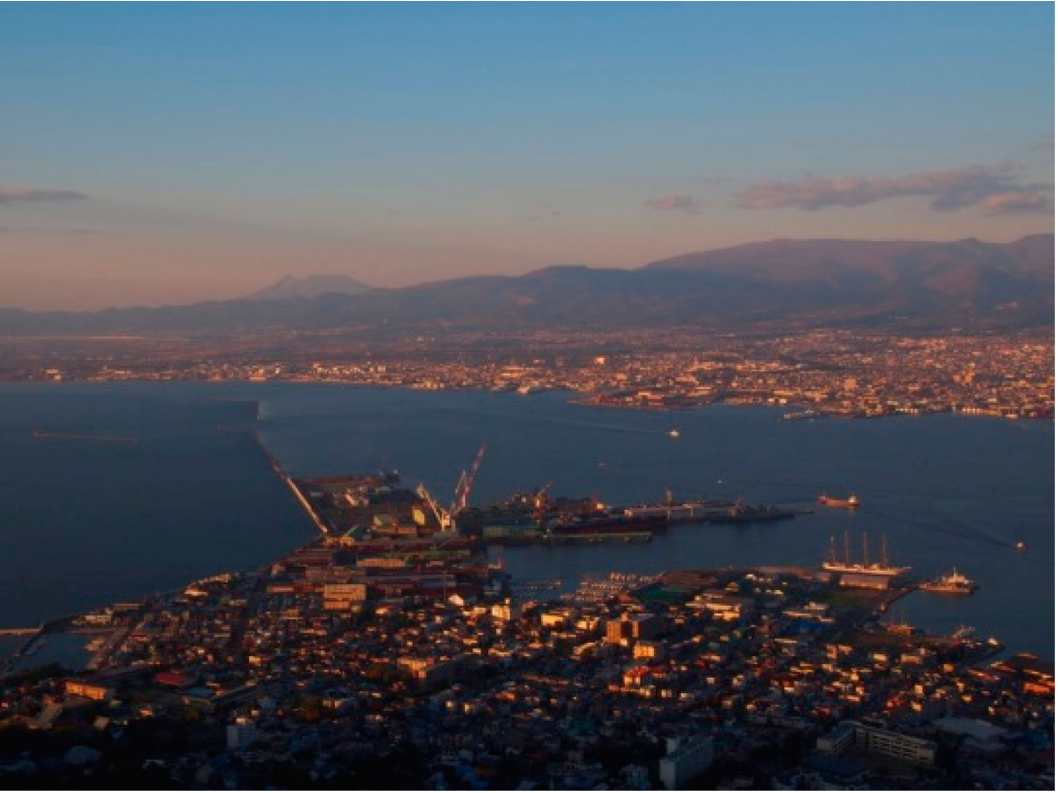


Figure 1 View of Hakodate (Ortiz-Moya, 2014).

from flows of capital and knowledge of second-tier and shrinking cities (Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2013) is depicted in the film through the loneliness of its citizens—they are disconnected between them as well as from the social structures of the city. The result is a fragmented society in a sketched film. This sense of loneliness and abandonment is bolstered by Kumakiri's filming technique; the film is filled with a quiet atmosphere of contemplative shots of the city from the distance, sometimes from people's backs (Figures 4 and 5), slow panoramas and the sparse use of words. Kaitan City works itself as a character; as Soja (2000) notes, 'what is described as social is always at the same time spatial' (8). Grey austere frames define Kumakiri's vision of shrinking cities; the panoramic sense of the urban space echoes the lack of hope for the inhabitants of shrinking cities—a constant thematic

argument in the five sketches that presents the life in Kaitan City.

The fragmented narrative allows contemplating life in a shrinking city from five viewpoints. Each story focuses on different aspects of the urban and personal decay taking place in Kaitan City. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify two differentiated parts in the film. The first half emanates melancholy and sadness; and in the second half we witness a rising fury and violent situations between different characters. The criss-crossing finale combines all the depicted places and characters, highlighting that, despite the supposed isolation of each person, they all live in the same place and experience similar issues. The first sketch tells the story of two siblings orphaned after their father dies in an accident at the shipyard; even so, the elder brother followed in his father's footsteps and became a shipbuilder himself. The second sketch



Figure 2 Film view of the city (*Sketches of Kaitan City*, 2010).



Figure 3 Film view of the shipyards (*Sketches of Kaitan City*, 2010).



Figure 4 Film view of the city (*Sketches of Kaitan City*, 2010).

focuses on Toki, an old woman living with her animals in a redeveloping area of the city. She is resisting vacating her house notwithstanding an eviction threat. The third

sketch revolves around the members of a broken family and their daily struggle to live together peacefully. The fourth one presents the life of the owner of a local gas



Figure 5 Film view of the city (*Sketches of Kaitan City*, 2010).

company, who is also experiencing difficulties in his family and work life. Finally, the fifth sketch accompanies one of Kaitan's streetcar drivers and his sudden encounter with his long gone son. This final sketch also combines the lives of all the characters, wrapping up the movie and juxtaposing Kaitan's fragmented social fabric with a unitary urban space.

The film's narrative fragmentation responds to the problematic of representing shrinking cities as single unitary entities. Contemporary cities have become 'collages of fragmented spaces defined by multiple identities, aspirations, life worlds and socio-economic and time-space circuits' (Graham and Marvin 2001, 112). Shrinkage processes exacerbate contemporary urban fragmentation: the physical fabric is perforated and broken, losing its continuity; the social fabric is torn with the growth of inequalities; and the labour market is destroyed. Kumakiri adds an emotive nature to the problem by focusing on the quotidian life of Kaitan's inhabitants and their response to the shrinkage problems, portraying the lived experience of ruination and how it affects the people who witness the decay of their surrounding environments (Mah 2012).

The episodic structure takes the film in a more complex emotional direction. Each of these stories offers new information to form a large mosaic of dramatic sentiments in richly textured images. Every sketch acts as a powerful narrative block that Kumakiri needs to portray because there is not just one story to talk about in shrinking cities. Kaitan's harsh living conditions show the problematic trend of urban shrinkage in Japanese cities in a real space; therefore, it helps to spread social conscience to the wider audience.

The five sketches present, in one way or another, the growing inequalities that happen in shrinking cities. In the same way that shrinking cities are the result of the global uneven distribution of capital, this disequilibrium is also present at a local level (Power, Plöger, and Winkler 2010). Globally,

common characteristics of shrinking cities are gentrification, social polarisation and poverty issues due to their worsened labour market (Großmann et al. 2013). *Sketches of Kaitan City* focuses on those harmed by the city's deindustrialisation. To construct this, Kumakiri defines Kaitan City through negation rather than revolution or reconstruction. In the first sketch, the siblings are living in a poor company house (Figures 6 and 7); yet, after the older brother is dismissed, he rejects to contemplate any other employment option but shipbuilding. In the second one, Toki refuses to move to another area even though the block is being redeveloped into an office complex. These two sketches are the only ones where poverty and the growth of inequalities are explicitly displayed. In the third and fourth ones, two families working closely inside the community—a planetarium worker and a gas seller—are living a life of hatred and disrespect, triggered by their increasingly difficult living conditions. The last sketch shows a lonely streetcar driver whose son is coming from Tokyo but has no intention to meet his father—neglecting the existence of his father still trapped in Kaitan City. Kumakiri conveys shrinking cities as places of social fragmentation and growing inequalities where inhabitants and local authorities are disconnected.

A closer reading of the two first sketches promotes a better understanding of the socio-economic processes that are triggering urban shrinkage and its consequences. In the first one, Kaitan City is portrayed as a company town, a city dominated by a single industrial sector or company. These types of cities are especially vulnerable to global capitalist restructuring, as their economic fabric usually relies on a single industrial sector; the transformation of that economic sector usually implies the total collapse of the city's socio-economic fabric leading to urban shrinkage (Fujii 2008). The shipyard is also structuring the social life of the city, with its inhabitant's lives holding tight to it. The sketch's narrative follows the shipyard's



Figure 6 Houses in Hakodate (Ortiz-Moya, 2013).

streamline from the point of view of the older brother, who became a shipbuilder himself following his father's death and his difficulties after the massive layoffs.

In the original book, the first sketch is entitled *Still Young Ruins*; the word 'ruins' does not refer to the physical ruins of abandoned buildings and characteristic of



Figure 7 Shipyard company houses (*Sketches of Kaitan City*, 2010).

industrial cities—nonetheless, ruins are not present in Japanese shrinking cities. Rather, it metaphorically represents the two siblings, and by extension, all the city's inhabitants. In post-industrial shrinking cities, 'the production of spaces of ruination and dereliction are an inevitable result of capitalist development and the relentless search for profit' (Edensor 2005, 4). The restructuring of capital entails the disposal of the low-profit elements of the production system; it can be the buildings, which became unused or underused as they could not hold the economic functions of the new emerging system, or even the workers. The sketch reinforces the elder brother's idea of having been disposed through its few dialogues; they focus on the importance of the shipyard for the workers and the strong sense of attachment to it. For the elder brother, the closure of the shipyard represents the destruction of his homeland; as Tuan (1977) points out, 'should destruction occur we may reasonably conclude that the people would be thoroughly demoralized, since the ruin of their settlement implies the ruin of their cosmos' (149). On the contrary to Tuan's assumption that human beings' resilience helps them to reconstruct his centre somewhere else, the two siblings are unable to reconstitute their homeland.

The second sketch repeats these two themes—capitalist spatial restructuring and homeland attachment—as its main storylines. It tells the story of Toki, an old woman living alone with her animals in an outskirt of Kaitan City. The area, a former rural village

that merged with Kaitan City, is undergoing redevelopment to house a new business park. The film presents the neighbourhood as a derelict space that is in stand-by waiting for the new economic function that will put it back in the capitalist game of economic usage of space (Lefebvre 1991) (Figure 8).

After being devaluated, the area is redeveloped manifesting the spatial reconstitution of capital that allows its constant expansion (Edensor 2005). The sketch shows a visit by one of Toki's long distant relatives, who is working for the city council. He goes to see Toki in order to persuade her to move to a different house; if not, she will be evicted. This sequence renders the abstract understanding of space by local authorities, who read it in economic terms and is based on its profitability. Yet, Toki's attachment to his homeland is stronger than any promise of a better house; the film's last scene shows Toki holding a cat surrounded by buildings under construction (Figure 9). This juxtaposition between the new and the old renders the inherent tensions of urban shrinkage processes, its coping mechanisms and how those affect the city's social fabric.

The final sketch combines all the different characters at a single place and time. The story of the streetcar driver and his encounter with his son recedes into the background, to focus on the encounter of the different characters in the streetcar. In a diegetic way, the tram operates as a narrative container where all the characters get together while they are heading towards the cable car to see the New Year's sunrise. Finally, the concatenated structure of the film is tied together. In an interview, Kumakiri remarks that this criss-crossing finale is not present in the original book; as he states, 'this is because Kaitan City is the protagonist [of the film]'.⁶ This cinematic construction of a shrinking city aligns social and economic transformations in a way that enables a holistic understanding of the problematic. The city is placed on the centre of the film's narrative, and we can witness how the global restructuring of the



Figure 8 Kaitan City (*Sketches of Kaitan City*, 2010).



Figure 9 Kaitan City (*Sketches of Kaitan City*, 2010).

economy affects the everyday life of people and the social processes that it triggers and the different coping mechanisms developed by the people affected by them.

***Hula Girls*: the economic transition in motion**

The geographical reorganisation of capital also structures Sang-Il Lee's *Hula Girls*. Nonetheless, the film focuses on the transition process from an economy based on extractive industries to tertiary activities. Based on real events, *Hula Girls* tells the story of a decaying mining town in northern Japan, which foreseeing the inevitable closure of the coal mine—the city's single source of employment—decides to open a Hawaiian holiday resort with live performances of hula dancers to save the city from extinction. The film conveys this economic transition from the point of view of the city's inhabitants and the conflicts that arise amongst them. The resolution of these conflicts moves the film's characters, and therefore the city, forward in the process of adapting

to the new necessities of capitalism. In contrast to *Sketches of Kaitan City*—whose inhabitants were disconnected inactive witnesses of the city's decay—*Hula Girls* centres its narrative on the local inhabitants that are driving the transformation of the city towards what seems a brighter future, and the opposition they encounter from other members of the community.

Hula Girls records this economic conversion at a given point in time and space: Iwaki City, Fukushima prefecture, 1965. In contrast to *Sketches of Kaitan City*—which represents a fictional city filmed in a real location—Iwaki is a recreated space based on a real city. Nevertheless, the film is representative of many mining towns that experienced severe problems after the decay of extractive industries since the 1970s. 'Shrinking mining cities' are a particular type of shrinking cities that encompass all the problems derived from the global economic globalisation as they are highly dependent on global forces, flows of capital, transnational corporations and fluctuating markets (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012b). *Hula Girls* takes place when the Japanese coal-mining sector

was starting its restructuring due to the country's new global economic outlook. Since the 1960s, the internationalisation of Japan's economy and the changing global coal market initiated the decline of national coal mining. Notwithstanding the different Coal Plans launched by the Japanese government in order to protect the country's coal production, the Japanese coal-mining sector followed a downward trajectory that was exacerbated with the increasing imports of oil (Culter 1999). Hence, previously thriving mining towns started their shrinkage.

We would like to detach ourselves from these particularities to concentrate our analysis on the wider trends that assimilate shrinking mining cities to more generic types of urban shrinkage. In these terms, we want to highlight that the film portrays what Amin (1994b) refers to as the change from the dominant form of capitalist development that emerged after the Second World War to a new cycle of capitalist development that appeared from the 1970s. This new cycle diminished the importance of secondary industries while triggering the development of tertiary ones; *Hula Girls* shows the transition between the previous and the new model. This thematic is set from the outset: the first five minutes of the film present the idea of the new Hawaiian resort and the beginning of the mine's decay, with the dismissal of 2000 workers. Therefore, the film portrays an evolving city that is trying to adapt itself to the new times that require a different economic model.

The coexistence of both models generates a series of intergenerational tensions amongst the city's inhabitants, which represent two apparently irreconcilable archetypes of economic development. The younger generations are excited about the possibility of a future not linked to the mining industry and its harsh working conditions. The older generations cannot imagine a future without the mine and despise the people who support the Hawaiian centre treating them as traitors to the mine and, therefore, to the community. Parallel to what is happening to the economic

model, societal values are being deconstructed and reconstituted by globalisation and post-Fordism (Amin 1994b). The town's motto 'one mountain, one family' that is seen in the city's assembly room is pushed near its breaking point due to the opposition to the new development (Figure 10).

Through this narrative thread *Hula Girls* reflects the social tensions that arise from the simultaneous forces of creation and destruction of actually existing neo-liberalism (Brenner and Theodore 2002) effects all different aspects of everyday life and social organisation of the community. Yet, the film stresses the importance of finding a way out of the socio-economic problems as a community, rather than individually.

Sang-Il constructs the evolution of the city, and ergo its society, in terms of oppositions— young and old, individual and community, past and future, Fordism and post-Fordism. This narrative structure bespeaks the apparent opposition between the two economic models depicted in the film. The new economic model, however, should not be understood as a mere rupture and directly opposed to the old one; it is rather a reconstitution of the previous cycle of capitalist expansion (Soja 2000). Certainly, the film evinces that capitalist development needs the construction of spaces that allow its development, to subsequently destroy them in order to be able to continue its growth (Harvey 2001). The mine is downsizing and its workers are being fired; therefore, the creative destruction of the space that previously allowed expansion. Nonetheless, the mining resources are transformed to fit the new development project. First, the mine's natural hot springs provide inexpensive energy to heat the indoor pool and the greenhouse that recreates Hawaii in a cold region. Second, the mine gives the initial capital to construct the resort. But most importantly, the mine supplies the human capital that drives the Hawaiian resort to its success: the hula girls that become its main attraction. *Hula Girls* juxtaposes the deconstruction and reconstruction of the economic fabric



Figure 10 *Hula Girls* (2006).

of the city conveying the forces that are behind urban shrinkage, not only in Japan but elsewhere in the world.

Oppositions are also an important aspect of academic debates about shrinking cities. On the one hand, the debates about shrinking cities have also focused their attention on oppositions as global and local, winners and losers or growth and shrinkage to name but a few (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012a; Zakirova 2010). On the other hand, urban shrinkage has been frequently studied from its opposite point of view; that of urban regeneration—or different processes that aim to cope with and solve this issue (Großmann et al. 2013). *Hula Girls* can be read as a film portraying a city initiating its urban regeneration process and the social challenges brought by it. Urban regeneration is

‘a comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental conditions of an area that has been subject to change’, (Tallon 2010, 5)

a definition that matches Iwaki’s Hawaiian resort and the aims triggering its construction. Through urban regeneration initiatives, cities aim to solve the mismatches between the economic global needs and the spaces that a city offers to fulfil those needs—in other words, urban regeneration initiatives allow a new spatial fix of capital (Harvey 2001). Iwaki’s authorities hope that the Hawaiian resort will create a new economic fabric for the city based on tourism and leisure that goes beyond the resort itself. The film portrays the city’s urban regeneration process in all its different stages and the challenges of each stage. At the beginning of the film, the Hawaiian centre is presented during the same union meeting that announces the mine’s downsizing and the dismissal of 2000 workers; after the pronouncement, the union leaders reveal the construction of the Hawaiian centre and a model to show the future of the city. Yet, when asked about the number of jobs that the Hawaiian centre will create, the representative of the project acknowledges that it will be around 500. The tension of this sequence is generated by the opposition between the old

and the new modes of economic development. The workers refuse the mere idea of the mine's closure, and blame the Hawaiian centre for it. The union leaders and local authorities see in the new resort their only opportunity of survival; it will lead the town towards the new era. From the outset, the representatives of the Hawaiian centre make clear that it will be made by the miners and for the miners. All the new jobs will be filled by miners and people from the community. Similarly, rather than hiring hula dancers from anywhere else, the daughters of the miners will become the main attraction of the resort. Therefore, Iwaki bases its strategy on the shift towards touristic activities based on the local human capital.

Rebranding is a fundamental part of urban regeneration, especially in cities trying to reconnect with global flows of capital. Cities pursuing the transformation of their economic model need to project that new image to the outside, as the external perception of cities usually falls in a simplistic approach that categorises them in terms of 'positive' or 'negative' images and ideas (Vanolo 2008). Industrial and extractive cities are generally seen as 'negative' spaces, where smoke, mills or factories dominate the landscape; therefore, they are not an ideal place to spend a family holiday. City branding aims to change the negative perception of a place and transform it into a delightful and pleasant place (Ward 1998). This transformation is important for cities aiming to increase their touristic appeal. That said, city branding cannot rely only on slogans and advertising campaigns. As a result, in order to consolidate the new image, it is necessary to display tangible signs of the undergoing nature of the change (Ward 2006).

Rather than being based on the Hawaiian resort itself, the rebranding of Iwaki City is based on the hula dancers and their story—their transformation from miners to performers—who become the main evidence of the city's regeneration, as they evolve from miners to key agents of the city's

reconstruction. Nonetheless, the mine is not neglected, and becomes one of the elements of the rebranding narrative; the mine appears on the background of the pictures taken to advertise the new Hawaiian resort, which are published in some magazines and are used for promotional campaigns (Figure 11).

During the film, Sang-Il Lee emphasises the changing character of places, as they are socially constructed. The same location can shine and be full of hope, or it can be cold, dark and hopeless (Figures 12 and 13). This juxtaposition between the old—the mine—and the new—the hula dancers—renders the tension between the two different times, generations and economic models; yet, these pictures also show the reconciliation between those tensions and the possibility of a new and brighter future for the mining city and its population. Besides, the girls go on a performance tour to the surrounding towns and cities to promote the Hawaiian centre, passing out flyers emphasising the city's transformation to reinforce the rebranding efforts and exhibiting the reliance on the hula dancers. Nonetheless, the rebranding of the city is aimed at both the external and the internal perception of the city—being the internal perception of its own inhabitants.

Duality, therefore, structures the film by providing the social outlook to urban shrinkage issues. The dual confrontation between individual and community conveys the changing social dynamics triggered by the current economic model. Harvey (2012), following Lefebvre's *Right to the City*, suggests that the right to the city is 'a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization' (4). The solution to Iwaki's problems comes from within the city, from its own inhabitants and social structures, which despite increasing tensions and conflicts decide to move forward with the regeneration process—in a way, questioning 'whose right to the city' (Marcuse 2009). In the film, Sang-Il stresses this idea with the



Figure 11 *Hula Girls* (2006).

visual composition of the frames—the panoramic views of the mountain, the miner's houses and the fact that the frames are always populated (Figure 14). This works as a memento of the formation of human landscapes and the social construction of the space, which is made by and for Iwaki's inhabitants. That community feeling

generates the tension between the inside and the outside, portrayed in the film as the mining community and the hula dance teacher—the only foreigner in the city.

Hula Girls conveys a city at the transition point from one socio-economic model to another—a similar story to that of many worldwide shrinking cities. It shows a



Figure 12 A sunny view of the city in *Hula Girls* (2006).



Figure 13 A cold view of the city in *Hula Girls* (2006).

decaying industry, its downsizing, the rise of tertiary activities and the rebranding of the city. Sang-Il Lee tackles this by portraying the social conflicts that are generated during the restructuring process. He puts attention on how the society, understood in the film

as the mining community, deals with the economic restructuring, and how this affects people's lives and its consequences. *Hula Girls* humanises the abstract concept of the global spatial reorganisation of capital by portraying the people experiencing and



Figure 14 View of the mining company houses in *Hula Girls* (2006).

affected by this macroeconomic phenomenon and how this process is lived by the affected people.

Conclusion

Following Barthes (1997), in order to face contemporary urban questions in general, and of shrinking cities in particular, 'it is not so much important to multiply the surveys or the functional studies of the city, but to multiply the readings of the city' (164). We would like to argue that the cinematic reading of cities expands the understanding of the urban realm and the socio-economic processes that shape cities. Films are able to evoke and visualise the lived experience of ruination, of economic restructuring processes, while at the same time evoking emotional responses to these processes. Through the two studied film-texts, it is analysed how shrinking cities are conveyed in cinema, linking the realities portrayed in the films with the theoretical strands that are driving the current discussion on shrinking cities. In both *Sketches of Kaitan City* and *Hula Girls*, despite marked differences in tone and scope, we have read the problematic of shrinking cities as being a direct result of the spatial reorganisation of capital. Still, through the evocative character of cinema, through our two film-texts we have added different layers of meaning to penetrate in the social dynamics that happens in line and as a result of that spatial reorganisation of capital.

Sketches of Kaitan City conveys how the concentration of economic resources in poles of central dominance is affecting peripheral cities, and how the city's inhabitants tackle this transformation. It renders an urban reality characterised by 'downsizing, unemployment, collapse of services, degradation in living standards, and loss of resources and environmental qualities' (Harvey 2000, 81). Through the film, shrinking cities are portrayed as the spaces disconnected from globalisation processes, with a

fragmented social space in which inhabitants feel impotent to overcome the problems derived from the economic restructuring that is reshaping their city. Alternatively, *Hula Girls* presents a more positive view of the problem of shrinking cities. The film renders the fight for survival of a city that resists disappearing. Iwaki's resilience⁷ relies on its inhabitants, who are the drivers of the city's change induced by their strong communal feeling—'one mine, one family'. Of particular interest here is how the city's anticipation to its future problematic—initiating its economic restructuring before decline actually starts—helped Iwaki to cope with the problems of population shrinkage and ameliorate the consequences of decline. Iwaki needed to rebrand itself, evolving from a mining town to a touristic destination. Moreover, the film conveys how 'branding is not constructing tabula rasa narratives; rather, it epitomizes a long articulation and framing process that must have a certain basis in the local identity and debates' (Vanolo 2008, 371). Despite the complete transformation of the city and its society, the local culture and heritage are present as a result of the miners/dancers. In *Sketches of Kaitan City* the decay is harsh to overcome, in *Hula Girls* sacrifice and reconstruction bring stability.

The reading of these two film-texts has presented a series of issues that are common with global shrinking cities. The way that Kumakiri and Sang-Il conceptualise urban shrinkage is based on the social problems derived from the shift from one stage of capitalist development to another: the constant process of deconstruction and reconstruction generated by global flows of capital needed for its expansion. Their approach, however, humanises the abstract idea of shrinking cities as the result of economic processes, to make clear its social aspects. Our account of urban shrinkage through its cinematic representation brings the social aspects of this spatial transformation centre stage, arguing that they are fundamental aspects of the process. Both films present different

viewpoints of the problem; compared with *Sketches of Kaitan City*, *Hula Girls* offers an optimistic view of a city that faces its problem of urban shrinkage as an opportunity to improve the living conditions of its inhabitants. On the contrary, *Sketches of Kaitan City* shows a city where its inhabitants have already lost all hope and inactively witness its decay. These two film-transcripts work as an allegory of the problematic of shrinking cities, of how economic restructuring affects society, of the spatial manifestation of those economic processes and of how society tackles it.

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Notes

- 1 The scholarship on urban shrinkage usually refers to four main causes as the drivers of decay processes. These are: suburbanisation, deindustrialisation, political transformation and ageing (Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2013).
- 2 The use of the term film-text in this paper refers to the definition by Metz (2004) who categorises a movie as a coherent and delimited structure of meaning that can be read as a book.
- 3 Mabel Walker (1947) used the word 'shrinking' saying that 'the [American] cities are not growing. They are shrinking. The process of urbanization has reversed itself' (697) in what seems the first time the term was used to describe a city.
- 4 Crump (2003) identifies five different approaches to the study of Japanese capitalism, which are 'the culturalist, bureaucratic guidance, super-

management, labour harmony and free ride approaches' (1). These approaches represent a different variant to capitalist production based on the Japanese context.

- 5 This process is especially significant in the Japanese urban system, as noted by Yahagi (2009).
- 6 Translated from the Japanese by the authors. The interview can be found at: http://www.realtokyo.co.jp/docs/ja/column/interview/bn/interview_024/
- 7 Iwaki's resilience was shown again after the Great Tohoku Earthquake that hit the city in March 2011. The Hawaiian resort was severely damaged and was closed for several months. During that time, the resort's hula dancers went on a tour around Japan in order to raise money for the victims of the earthquake and tsunami'.

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Films

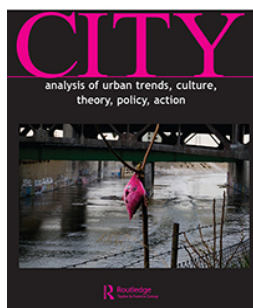
Sketches of Kaitan City (Kaitanshi Jokei, dir. Kazuyshi Kumakiri, 2010).

Hula Girls (Fura Gâru, dir. Sang-Il Lee, 2006).

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Endpiece: From LA to Standing Rock and beyond: A holistic reading of confluences

Andrea Gibbons & Debbie Humphry

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Endpiece: From LA to Standing Rock and beyond: A holistic reading of confluences

Andrea Gibbons and Debbie Humphry

Andrea Gibbons is from Arizona, USA, and worked as a community worker in Los Angeles, which influenced both her short story, 'The El Rey Bar' (2011), and her article 'Linking Race, the Value of Land and the Value of Life' in CITY (this issue). Here¹ Andrea talks to Debbie Humphry about the key themes running through both her fiction and academic work. Debbie is CITY's web editor, UEL research fellow, and photographer, who works on housing, class, social mobility and social justice.



The LA River. Photo: Andrea Gibbons.

Debbie: What motivated you to write the story?

Andrea: Well I've always written fiction, but of course my stories are shaped by my history. Because I grew up very poor, and since then I've worked in communities of even greater poverty and problems, and I think that sort of experience just fills you with so much frustration and rage and anger. And also love. The two things that really fuel me are fury and love. So fiction for me is the best outlet for that. The story's by no means biographical, but there are people that I know that are very much in that world. Young people. And there's always that feeling you have somewhere like LA where homicide and gun violence is so prevalent – you're always worried about them. So this is me reacting.

Debbie: Could you talk a bit about the social and political context from which the story emerged?

Andrea: I was thinking about riot and rebellion and what that would actually look like in LA if it became more widespread. And there are of course already famous examples in LA. In '65 the Watts Riots, better said the Watts uprisings. And then '92. So really thinking about what would happen now. There's this idea of walls – what's always struck me most living in LA was the segregation, which is why I've also written about that academically. Thinking about the walls between groups that exist, that are implicit, and the amount of fear, and what might grow from that if there was a serious uprising. So combining that macro-level with what would happen at the micro level. Thinking about what I would be doing. I worked for a group called Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) in South Central LA, so we would obviously be collecting water and helping people and doing all this work². Then what would people around me be doing? When you are part of a community, different realities always sit side by side.

People who are politically aware, and then people who are still trapped within these violent worlds. Things happen to them and they take what they can from it and they don't think about it in a bigger context. So I was thinking through these things. We also live in physical context that works to keep people from thinking too much, that focuses them on just getting through each day. Right across the street from SAJE there was a for-profit methadone clinic, which is just a horrific thing to even exist. A methadone clinic that didn't provide any kind of supportive services, so people would get their methadone and then there was a thriving drug economy right in front of it. One morning someone got shot out in front. It felt very desolate and apocalyptic already. So some of the bits of this story were just responding to this apocalyptic landscape in front of us that I had to see every day. It's a landscape of death in a lot of ways, of self-destruction, sitting right next to other really vibrant stuff. I think that's the reality of South Central and a lot of disinvested neighbourhoods, where you have people fighting to make it better, fighting to make community, right next to other people that have given up basically, and are just trying to get through the day. So survival and self-medication and hedonism and finding family in gangs and violent activities. You have these two kinds of reactions side by side and they inter-mingle. And you love people that are involved in both of these reactions. It's a very difficult place to live and to thrive. And everyday there were visual reminders of these contradictions in the landscape of disinvestment and despair.

Debbie: What were you doing at the community centre?

Andrea: It was a popular education centre, so working with people to solve their own problems. We did community work, organizing and bringing people together to name their reality and to change it. The principle issues were displacement and slum housing. We

were working right on the edges of downtown, where properties were being bought up as downtown was gentrifying. So for ages this area had been severely disinvested with white flight, with beautiful Victorian houses cut up into smaller apartments, and absentee owners just milking their tenants for money. Collecting rents but never investing anything back in. So we worked with families with rats and roaches everywhere. One of the doctors told us they had to pull roaches out of kids' ears three times a week on average. And there were stories about rat bites, roaches nibbling children's eyelashes. And rashes, mould and lead poisoning. Under development pressures the slum conditions were getting worse, as owners let buildings deteriorate to force people out. Then they would be redone and rented to students or turned into boutique hotels. So most of the work I did was around environmental justice issues. We were fighting to improve the housing, but preserving people's right to stay in their own housing. We were also fighting huge levels of harassment, and owners coming by at 3 am to harass tenants, or threatening them with immigration or child protection services. Taking them to court over and over and over again. So we formed Tenants' Unions. We worked very closely with families, primarily with women's circles. A lot of stuff would come out just in talking, having a circle of women talking about their housing and then that would come round to domestic violence and problems with their kids, around drug use. We were completely immersed in the issues the community were facing and trying to solve them together. The other thing that became clear to me was that we won pretty much every campaign that we were involved in, but it wasn't enough to win in the long term, particularly the fight against gentrification and displacement. Nothing we were doing was really tackling that.

Debbie: So it's like winning all these battles but not winning the war. I've thought that myself with campaigning, especially when you're up against money, capital.

Andrea: Yes exactly. So that was the stuff I was tackling in my PhD thesis, this bigger picture of development and why was it that all the money had left the neighbourhood and now it was all coming back in. And it's inexorable the way it comes back in. So thinking about how to have an impact on that level is what drove me to go and do my thesis. Indirectly my nonfiction, but especially the fiction comes out of all of these stories and what I felt, the frustration and the rage, and the love as well. Because some of the most amazing people I've met have been there fighting and fighting and fighting. But these huge impersonal forces are still coming in.

Debbie: When Bob Catterall (2016) referred to your short story in his editorial he was talking about the use of fiction in sociology, about different ways of telling the socio-spatial story. The style in your CITY article (Gibbons 2017) is obviously very different to the story, but it touches on some of the same issues. So I wondered how you felt about the two different ways of speaking about social issues, and the divide between fact and fiction.

Andrea: For me they are two very different ways to think through the same issues. For me fiction is more about the story. It's about the emotions and the character and the thought trajectory. I knew that story was done when the twist at the end came to me, when they found the vicodin, which was probably stolen off the friend that was killed. I mean the goal of the story writer is to write a good story. To write a believable story that really brings someone into a world and makes them feel something. And then the goal of the academic is to wrestle with an issue and illuminate it through a lot of thoughtfulness and connecting it to theory and thinking about what's happening. So for me they're very separate in how you approach them, and I think probably for me fiction will always remain separate. That said, I think exploring how we understand

reality through reading fiction really helps you understand things that you've never experienced. I think for academics that's really important. Particularly given the way that academia is set up to really privilege certain kinds of experience and background. So I think to use stories as windows into experience, I like that idea. I've found – and this is speaking very generally of course – that many people in academia don't always realise how removed their way of thinking, their theory is from practice. For ten years I'd been in practice, and the difficulty of relating to people in that first year of my PhD was striking.

Debbie: The CITY article that comes from your PhD uses historical documentary evidence, and doesn't focus on people's stories.

Andrea: I used documentary evidence because I wanted to contextualize my own stories, and the stories of the people I worked with to try and change LA. For me the question was, what was the bigger context that we were fighting against? I was grappling with how property markets worked, looking at David Harvey's work and Neil Smith's work. But in some ways that didn't relate to the situation in LA because these critics don't really deal with race and segregation. So the thesis was a moment for me to step back and grapple with all these issues, to understand the larger forces at work shaping the neighbourhoods we lived in, how they were related to race and class because I knew those two things were fundamental. Now that it's done I think I'd really like to go back more into oral histories and interviews, allowing people to tell their own stories, to me that's really powerful. So the thesis was laying a groundwork. And I like that tension between those two very different worlds.

Debbie: The two worlds of the structural and the everyday voices?

Andrea: Yeah. Exactly. And how people understand their own reality. And how that's shaped, and how that shapes bigger contexts. Because I think having been engaged in struggle for so long I always felt that when you're fighting you keep hitting these walls. Power's a very real thing when you're engaged in a struggle, a campaign. Theory is most exciting when it illuminates those walls, and shows you ways to think about them and how to get over them, how to smash them or break them.

Debbie: I'm thinking about what the wall is. What I think you're talking about is the structure. So you did your thesis to understand the structural underpinning of what was stopping your campaign, despite winning the battles. The structure of the property development machine and the speculative housing market. So I guess it's a different wall to the story but it's still about people in power putting structures in place that allow them to perpetuate their own privileged resources, positions and discourses: visible and invisible walls.

Andrea: Yes, I think there's all this stuff bubbling, subconscious and conscious. I think the beauty of fiction is it allows you to let it out without controlling it in the same way, in following up an initial idea you often don't even know what will come out when you're writing fiction. The thesis is a different journey, though surprise is still a part of it. Theory helped me to understand and make sense about how change can happen. Fiction helps me get to that same point but in a very different way, and there's lots in there that I don't need to explain. It's a very different process but I think they're complementary. It was very emotional writing the thesis and working through all of this stuff, learning about the long, long history in LA of struggles over land and walls and segregation. Stuff about the KKK, which was a force in LA with over 18,000 members.

They practically ran a suburban town in South LA, Anaheim, where Disneyland is. They had a majority there on the council for a while – someone coined the term Klanaheim, which I love because it is still a conservative place. I had no idea about the level of bombings and arson attacks and the killings. So the story explores my sense of that reality, even before I had started thinking about it very analytically, it is the lived result of all that history. It's interesting just how much history impacts you even if you don't know it because of the ways it is built into the city itself and the relationships that fill it, and that the story still holds up even with knowing more about the history and larger context now. And actually it makes more sense in a way. It shows what your intuition or your lived experience feels like, that illuminates this longer history.

Debbie: Yes because when I was reading the story it made me think about all kinds of things, academic concepts such as capitalism and consumption, Angel as the flawed consumer. Then gender divides, intersectionality. And I started thinking about Black Lives Matter. So not only did you bring this stuff to your story without necessarily being aware of the wider context, but as a reader you bring your own understanding. So I was thinking about control of space, the military police control of space that was such a big theme of the analysis of Athens in the film, *Future Suspended*, in September's blog (Brekke and Humphry 2016).

Andrea: I think that one of the unifying aspects that we're seeing around the world now is this military control of space.

Debbie: And the issue of 'crisis', which is caused by this structurally induced plundering of resources by the rich, which means that the poor are getting poorer, whether that's austerity or unfettered capitalism. The 'crisis' is that the people who are in poverty are then rioting, erupting, looting, whatever means of survival. And then in the name of

'crisis' they are over-policed, which just exacerbates even more the unequal divide. With the *Future Suspended* film in my mind, I think these issues played totally into the themes of your story.

Andrea: One of the books I read recently that I liked the most was Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (2011). She writes about this moment that we're in where actually a whole community's been written off. It follows on from this Marxist idea of the surplus of labour, that you keep this proletariat that can take on jobs and then get fired. But there's been a whole population now in the U.S., and I think in a way the EU has done that to all of Greece, you're not even seen as a proletariat or future workers, you are all disposable. The only thing that's left for us is to cut our losses and keep what we have and the rest of you, we're just going to let you go. Just do whatever you do. Michelle Alexander talks about how that's been the major change, that whole communities are just written off, it's not even worth keeping them around as surplus labour. So we're just going to put them in jail, or let them live in these areas that have been completely, completely devastated and do our best to forget they are there.

Debbie: In the story you were talking about they wouldn't send an ambulance, and it made me think about New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina.

Andrea: Just knowing that the first people who came into Katrina were armed soldiers and police, and they were there to shoot people. And it's the same thing that happened to Haiti I think, and again it's a military response rather than a humanitarian response, because you have these disposable communities. Less than human. To me that's the beauty of fiction, all that stuff can bubble up and you don't have to be aware necessarily, you don't have to process it analytically – you don't want to process it that way. Whereas if I was going to write about

that academically I'd want to think about that deeply and be analytical and clear.

Debbie: It's a bit like everyday life, it's all happening at the same time and you can suggest that in fiction. You can do academic analysis of everyday life, but when you analyse it you end up dissecting bits out.

Andrea: You kind of have to, but how do you knit that back together?

Debbie: Intersectionality is a way of trying to do that, of trying to deal with everyday complexities.

Andrea: It is, and that's something I struggled with. In my academic work I didn't do gender nearly enough because it's just a whole other level of stuff to think through. So in the story I think it comes through really clearly, but in my academic work it's a whole other literature and lens. So there's a book coming out where I'm working through more of that better. The one thing that's similar with both writing fiction and non-fiction is that you're still telling the story that explains in different ways.

Debbie: So I was thinking about Black Lives Matters that started in 2012, and I wondered how your story relates to current issues and contexts.

Andrea: I think what the Black Lives Matter stuff has really succeeded in doing is really bringing out a lot of the stuff that I've been struggling with, bringing it really right into the open. The whole time I was in LA, the killings, the deaths in custody, the police killings of people have always been there. And always been under the radar of people outside of that community. I was so filled with rage so often in urban planning at UCLA, because there were a lot of people really removed, again going back to the segregation, whose life experiences were so completely removed. The amount of violence, particularly from

the police, was always a huge part of our worlds. And it really struck me that one of the dividing lines in our society is attitudes to the police. I come from a world where the police are always dangerous. They're always the bad guys, and they're not safe, and you don't call them when you're in trouble unless you have absolutely no option. And when I was teaching at LSE and we were talking, it just struck me that I'm talking to a room of people for whom the police are good guys. And I think that's one of the major dividing lines in society. And I think that had always been in the background for me, coming from a poor area, that's just your status quo that the police aren't there to help you. Whereas for other people that's not true. So I think the Black Lives Matter has really been able to bring that stuff up to the surface and make that an issue.

Debbie: It's impossible to think about these issues now without reflecting on the recent American election, and I was particularly struck by parallels between the image in your story of building a raced and classed wall, and Donald Trump's threatened Mexican-US border wall.

Andrea: I think Donald Trump is just another reflection of those dividing lines. In my academic work I explored LA's segregation and it has always been about putting up walls to protect white privilege, socially and spatially and economically. It's about preserving white supremacy. These walls were maintained in the courts, in policy and practice, and through an extraordinary level of violence from both police and white communities. Trump taps into this, talks a lot about walls. His world is divided between 'us' and 'them' and it is terrifyingly obvious who 'us' is – white, mostly middle-aged and older, with something to protect and afraid of how the world is changing. It's an enclave mentality, a circle-the-wagons mentality that is going to continue to pillage and gather all the resources possible while there are still resources to gather – because I think they

are all afraid of global warming even as they deny it with their last breath – and deny the humanity of everyone outside those gates. It is a familiar mentality. We're seeing it all play out again in the military actions against Native American struggles for water at Standing Rock – they are fighting for all of us and the land itself and yet the government has brought in tanks. And so Trump's election has not surprised me, yet it has also hit me with an almost unbearable level of existential dread, because everyone I love is outside those gates. One thing, though, there is a good thing about walls in that just like barricades, those with more privilege can choose where they stand. Being on the right side – and there is clearly a right side here – and supporting the struggle of those who have long been fighting there, because they don't have a choice, is a choice that people can make. And hopefully we will see the alliances come together that we need to change how things work. Hopefully we will see a great diversity of people taking their stand to bring down those walls from the outside.

Notes

- 1 An extract from the full interview, first published on the CITY website on 29 November 2016, [http://www.city-analysis.net/2016/11/29/andrea-](http://www.city-analysis.net/2016/11/29/andrea-gibbons-talks-to-debbie-humphry-about-the-el-rey-bar-and-race-and-class-segregation-in-the-usa/)

[gibbons-talks-to-debbie-humphry-about-the-el-rey-bar-and-race-and-class-segregation-in-the-usa/](http://www.city-analysis.net/2016/11/29/andrea-gibbons-talks-to-debbie-humphry-about-the-el-rey-bar-and-race-and-class-segregation-in-the-usa/)

- 2 Thinking about it, water is life. There are battles over it going on all over the world. LA depends on miles and miles of pipes and canals for its water, it is a monument to unsustainability. If anything on this scale were to happen, wouldn't there be an attempt to control the water supply? To save it for those on one side of the wall, or to use it as leverage? LA has such a long and conflicted history around water, just think *Chinatown* and communities like those in the Owens Valley destroyed so the city (and the profits from developing it) could grow. But then again, perhaps it was just the constant threat of the 'big one', and the knowledge that water is always what you need to stockpile and conserve in any emergency.

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