
City becoming world: Nancy, Lefebvre, and the global–urban imagination

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Abstract. It is part of the self-conception of the contemporary era that the world is becoming increasingly *global* and *urban*. This paper explores the global–urban imagination in works by Jean-Luc Nancy and Henri Lefebvre. Both Nancy and Lefebvre understand globalization as a fundamentally violent and unequal process that unfolds through the uneven expansion of a particular sort of urban space. They both strive to articulate a critical stance towards this process by opposing globalization to the idea of *mondialisation* or world forming. While their respective approaches differ in important ways, they both provide indispensable critical tools for conceptualizing the urban planet and its political possibilities. Their positions are briefly contrasted to the conservative imagery of the urban planet as techno utopia that was produced at Expo 2010 in Shanghai, China.

Keywords: globalization, urbanization, mondialisation, worldhood, urban planetarity, Nancy, Lefebvre, Expo 2010

1 Introduction: a vast urban hive

“Will the city disappear or will the whole planet turn into a vast urban hive?—which would be another mode of disappearance.”

Lewis Mumford (1989 [1961], page 3)

The 21st century is coming to be known as the moment when the planet became urban. For a growing number of analysts, boosters, critics, and political actors this is the era of megacities and urban hyperdevelopment, an epoch marked by the demise of rural autonomy and the unprecedented permeation of the world by urban society. It is becoming part of the common sense of mainstream public discourse that the contemporary age is a “new urbanized era” (Khanna, 2010, page 122). The United Nations and the World Bank seek to manage the “global urban expansion” (Angel et al, 2005; UNDESA, 2008; UNDP, 2005). Think tanks mull the arrival of the “urban future” (Worldwatch Institute, 2007). Geologists debate the emergence of an ‘anthropogenic’ epoch (Crutzen, 2002; Zalasiewicz and Williams, 2010) when human action transforms the planet and “[u]rbanisation totally dominates the huge metalogistical systems ... that make up the contemporary world” (Hodson and Marvin, 2010, page 300). Geographers (Champion and Hugo, 2004; Clark, 1998; Schmid, 2006; Soja, 2000; Soja and Kanai, 2007), planners (Sieverts, 2003), philosophers (Cunningham, 2005; Gunn, 1998), economists (Montgomery, 2008), and environmental historians (McNeill, 2000) all propose, from a wide range of perspectives, the idea that we are witnessing a “transition to a predominantly urban world” (Satterthwaite, 2007).

For much of the 20th century the urban globe was still what Henri Lefebvre considered to be a “possible object” (2003, page 5), an “illuminating virtuality” (page 17). Today, however, Lefebvre’s virtual object seems to have become real. According to Edward Soja and Miguel Kanai,

“More than ever before, it can be said that the Earth’s entire surface is urbanized to some degree, from the Siberian tundra to the Brazilian rainforest to the icecap of Antarctica,

perhaps even to the world's oceans and the atmosphere that we breathe. Of course, this does not mean that there are dense agglomerations everywhere, but the major features of urbanism as a way of life—from the play of market forces and the effects of administrative regulations, to popular cultural practices and practical geopolitics—are becoming ubiquitous. To a degree not seen before, no one on Earth is outside the sphere of influence of urban industrial capitalism” (2007, page 62).

Soja and Kanai make clear that to speak of an urban planet is not to imagine that highways and skyscrapers cover the entire earth. Nor do theorists of the global–urban necessarily posit a ‘radical break’ (Beauregard, 2006) in the development of urban space, so much as numerous processes of sociospatial transformation. What most statements of the global–urban imaginary do tend to share, despite their differences, is the notion that the planet no longer hosts discrete urban islands. Instead, there is a sprawling worldwide urbia, massively uneven and unequal and ranging across radically different social spaces, which has covered the globe and brought “the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos” (Wirth, 1938, page 2).

Planetary urbanization raises huge questions about politics, space, and social knowledge. How can we understand the politics of the global–urban imagination? What counts as valid knowledge in urban studies for a world dominated by cities? Is what Eduards Mendieta calls “our conceptual gestalt of the planet” (2001, page 7) adequate to account for our planetary practices? David Harvey (1996) has written, “Acceptance of the globalization language is disempowering for all anti-capitalist and even moderately social democratic movements” (page 429). If that is the case, how can we even begin to formulate critical conceptions of the globe “without always already having accepted the discursive framework that makes it possible to talk about globalization” (Stäheli, 2003, page 6)? In our “global urban condition” (Brenner et al, 2011, page 226) can the city still function as a normative ideal (Young, 1990)? As Ash Amin (2006, page 1011) asks, “What remains of the urban as demos in these circumstances?” (page 1011). In other words, what constitutes the urban globe, and how can we reason about it politically?

This paper attempts to address some of these questions through readings of key works by Jean-Luc Nancy and Henri Lefebvre. In contrast to many approaches to contemporary global urbanization that blanket and mystify the political questions at stake, these two thinkers offer critical theories of globalized urban society. Both Nancy and Lefebvre understand globalization as a fundamentally violent and unequal process that unfolds, at least in part, through the expansion of a particular sort of urban space. They both strive to articulate a critical stance towards this process by opposing to globalization the idea of *mondialisation* or world forming, although their respective notions are rooted in different political impulses. As I shall argue, neither of their accounts fully resolves all of the theoretical quandaries surrounding the global–urban. But they both provide indispensable critical tools for conceptualizing the urban planet and its political possibilities.

Although today's globe is the product of recent conditions, the emergence of an urban planet has been anticipated for more than one hundred years. Lefebvre (1996) notes, “Globalization and the planetary nature of the urban phenomenon ... appeared in science fiction novels before they were revealed to our understanding” (page 113). Indeed, at the dawn of the 20th century H G Wells predicted the “probable diffusion of great cities” which would usher in a future when

“the city will diffuse itself until it has taken up considerable area and many of the characteristics ... of what is now country The old antithesis will indeed cease, the boundary lines will altogether disappear” (1901, page 70).

Not only science fiction writers and utopian socialists like Wells but also conservative intellectuals like Oswald Spengler (1991 [1932]) imagined the coming of a future ‘world-city’. Patrick Geddes (1949 [1925]) saw ‘conurbations’ as representative of either unlivable ‘Kakotopia’ or pleasant ‘Eutopia’, both of which signified urbanism beyond city limits. Functionalist sociologists and demographers like Kingsley Davis anticipated ‘complete world urbanization’, the not-too-distant time when “rurality” will “have disappeared, leaving only a new kind of urban existence” (1955, page 437). Futurists and planners such as Constantinos Doxiadis imagined the coming of a worldwide “Ecumenopolis” when “the unified settlement of Anthropos will cover the entire globe” (Doxiadis and Papaioannou, 1974, page 343), a form of life which will require the authoritarian rule of a technocratic “global leader” (page 382). As these brief examples demonstrate, the urban planet has been posited from a wide range of political and methodological perspectives.

Nancy and Lefebvre can be seen as critical voices in this larger tradition of imagining an urban globe. Their positions are particularly important today, when global economic conditions seem to foreclose the field of political possibility. Many narratives of globalization—such as Thomas Friedman’s (2005) well-known vision of a flat world characterized, among other things, by mass rural-to-urban migration and global competition—use the specter of an interconnected planet in order to make neoliberal policies appear inevitable. Proceeding from the image of an omnicompetitive, interlinked urban world, management consultants and business analysts compile intricate quantitative hierarchies of global cities (eg, Dobbs et al, 2011) that have the effect of steering politicians and planners further towards neoliberal urban policies. Movements in urban design associated with ‘new urbanism’ and the ‘creative city’ draw upon a similar global–urban imaginary to promote the desirability and necessity of ‘returning’ to relocalized urban space. And other contemporary voices, such as that of Edward Glaeser (2011), promote reinvestment in urbanism on the grounds of economic efficiency. In all of these cases market-centric political claims are bolstered by particular global–urban imaginaries.

As critics of these ideas have pointed out (eg, Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Lehrer and Milgrom, 1996; Peck, 2005; Robinson, 2006), each of these new urbanisms can be seen as compatible with an unequal urban order, if not generative of new forms of inequality. And as these examples show, many usages of concepts such as globalism, cosmopolitanism, community, and urbanity are unable to articulate critical perspectives on today’s city or world. In contrast, both Nancy and Lefebvre provide critical global–urban imaginaries. I will not attempt here to provide comprehensive overviews of their social thought, nor do I intend to affirm one over the other. Rather, by exploring the ways in which they imagine the global–urban, I want to show how both Lefebvre and Nancy point towards new theory and new political possibilities for an urban planet.

2 *Urbs et orbis*

“These days, it seems like the world is being stolen from the world, at the very moment it’s becoming ‘worldwide’, at the very moment of globalization.”

Nancy (2007b, page 530)

In *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (2007a), Nancy asks, “can what is called ‘globalization’ give rise to a world, or to its contrary?” (page 29). This question at first seems to be nonsense. But Nancy’s “critical way of thinking the world” (Meurs et al, 2009, page 43)—drawing from Hegel, Marx, Derrida and especially Heidegger—is built upon a number of important contrasts, and one of the most central is the distinction between different meanings of ‘the world’. Nancy argues that two senses of ‘the world’ are generally conflated: “world as the givenness of what exists” and “world as a globality of sense” (2007b, page 32).

The former sense of ‘world’ is merely the sum total of things in existence, as in the phrase ‘everything in the world’. In contrast, the latter is

“a totality of meaning. If [for example] I speak of ‘Debussy’s world’ ... one grasps immediately that one is speaking of a totality, to which a certain meaningful content or a certain value system properly belongs” (2007a, page 41).

A world in this latter sense means a meaningful, shared context. Worldhood here implies “an ethos, a *habitus* and an inhabiting” (page 42). A group that holds anything in common—living in proximity, or sharing vulnerability to disease, say—can be said to exist in the same world in the first sense. But in order to qualify as sharing a world in the second sense, they need to be able to form this bare world into something more sensible or inhabitable—to be able to communicate dialogically, for example, or to cooperatively transform the conditions of their coexistence.

This contrast underpins another distinction that Nancy deploys, between globalization and mondialisation. The former refers to the integration of world in the first sense. It has “up to this point been limited to economic and technological matters” (page 29). Globalization links together the world, but its links are purely formal. As I shall explain, globalization, as “enclosure in the undifferentiated sphere of a unitotality” (page 28), has something threatening and overwhelming about it. The qualities of enclosure, finality, and totalistic lack of differentiation are central to it. Mondialisation, in contrast, stands for incompleteness, becoming, openness, natality. The term refers to becoming-worldwide, or ‘worldwide becoming’, ‘world forming’, or the ‘creation of the world’. It could be put as ‘worldization’, or, perhaps, as ‘worlding’ (but see Roy, 2011; Simone, 2001). It refers to the emergence of a world in the second sense of a shared context or dwelling. Nancy is not the only theorist to make use of the globalization/mondialisation distinction (see Axelos, 2005; Elden, 2008; Lefebvre, 2009; Li, 2007; Stäheli, 2003). Jacques Derrida, one of Nancy’s mentors and inspirations, used these same terms in a number of interviews in the late 1990s, a few years before *The Creation of the World* was originally published (eg, Derrida, 2005, pages 112–120). But Nancy is probably this distinction’s most systematic and creative user.

Considering that mondialisation is the French equivalent to globalization in English, there is obviously some potential for confusion. Indeed, the terms present perennial problems for translators (see Bowlby, 2005, page ix; Brenner and Elden, 2009, page 22; Raffoul and Pettigrew, 2007, page 1). But Nancy would insist that this confusion is actually a symptom. He casts the English language as something like the official dialect of neoliberal economic integration. The English word globalization thus names precisely a process where the distinctiveness of the world is drowned by something becoming ubiquitous. Whereas mondialisation suggests something else: the emergence of a world that is open-ended and creative, a way of social existence that is necessarily shared and inherently unique. That is why Nancy insists that “mondialisation preserves something untranslatable while globalization has already translated everything” (2007a, page 28, original emphasis).

Globalization, for Nancy, has unfolded over centuries. It is the process whereby “[t]he West has come to encompass the world” (page 35), where scientific modernity colonizes the planet and severs all connection to an otherworld. Globalization is constituted by a long process of secularization and disenchantment. Nancy sees “the modern enigma” (page 50) as “the end of the world”, in the sense of loss of order and orientation. “There is no longer any world: no longer a mundus, a *cosmos*, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation” (Nancy, 1997, page 4). There is now only *this* world, with no constitutive outside or next-world—neither a transcendent god nor external nature—from which to provide limit or meaning. The process of becoming-global—so far it has been only technological and economic—removed the

beyond-world that had been the source of our ‘sense of the world’, which now must be formulated, by us, from within this world.⁽¹⁾

This centuries-long process of globalization has entered a new stage with the increased integration of the planet into a social and spatial system dominated by the world market of neoliberal technocapitalism. Nancy’s critique is that with this phase of globalization, “the world has lost its capacity to ‘form a world’ [*faire monde*]” (2007a page 34). Not only is globalization the creation of a whole (in the first sense) that is not a world (in the second sense); it is the *opposite* of world forming, in that it means “the suppression of all world-forming of the world” (page 50). In fact, Nancy identifies globalization with “that capacity of proliferating the unworld” (page 34)—*immonde*, which also means unclean, vile, or sinful. Globalization here is the proliferation of something uninhabitable, something deadly. Indeed, for Nancy, global experience today originates in the concrete possibility of planetary destruction. “The fact that the world is destroying itself is ... the fact from which any thinking of the world follows” (page 35). If anything today is global or universal, it is the threat of catastrophe, insecurity and terror, a worldwide “death drive” (page 34), which is increasingly experienced by all—and which thus raises planetary being as a question.

There are many different ways of forming a planetary whole. Everything on Earth could become linked together. But if this whole only brings with it a common danger rather than shared agency, it is not the dawn of some new global society, not the creation of a world in Nancy’s second sense, but instead just a “piling up” (page 33), the accumulation of junk, “an unprecedented geopolitical, economic, and ecological catastrophe” (page 50). It is one of Nancy’s main goals to highlight the distinction between these two forms of totality, a distinction not captured by the usual narratives about globalization.

Central to Nancy’s stance here is that globalization entails the homogenization of sense and a flattening of meaning. Perhaps in response to this Nancy’s discussion includes a number of puns and translinguistic epithets. He writes that, as colonized by globalization, the Earth, which would be (in Latin) *globus*, the sphere of the world, is actually just a ball, *glomus*, which he links to the word ‘agglomeration’, a piling up that is often associated with conurbation. “The agglomeration invades and erodes what used to be thought of as *globe* and which is nothing more now than its double, *glomus*” (pages 33–34, original emphasis). Nancy names the ‘globality’ of *glomus* as ‘glomicity’, a horrific blob world marked by “indefinite growth of techno-science, of a correlative exponential growth of populations, of a worsening of inequalities of all sorts” (pages 33–34) and “the circulation of everything in the form of commodity” (page 37). Despite this lexical cheekiness, the simultaneous covering and stripping bare of the globe—its glomalization, as it were—is a deadly serious matter characterized by inequality, death, and suffering. As he has it, the *glomus* of globalization “is not a ‘world’: it is a ‘globe’ or a ‘glome,’ it is a ‘land of exile’ and a ‘vale of tears’” (page 42).

This is where Nancy’s account of globalization reconnects with urban questions. The language of *glomus* brings Nancy’s critique of globalization into contact with the tradition of literary social criticism that imagines an urban planet as an anarchic, polluted dystopia. One of the hallmarks of globalization, and a sign of its unworldliness, is the planetary diffusion of a certain kind of debased urban space. The urban is not some ‘local’ antithesis to the global; here, globalization unfolds through urbanization. With globalization “it is no longer possible to identify either the city or the orb of the world in general” (page 33). The same process of agglomeration that erodes the spacing of the world also erases the order of the city.

⁽¹⁾ It should be noted that neither Nancy nor Lefebvre considers the idea—perhaps best represented by Carl Sagan’s (1994) ‘cosmic perspective’—that science itself could be a form of mondialisation. They both see science almost exclusively as part of technocracy and an agent of disenchantment. But a democratized science could potentially contribute to world forming as well.

“The city spreads and extends all the way to the point where, while it tends to cover the entire orb of the planet, it loses its properties as a city, and, of course with them, those properties that would allow it to be distinguished from a ‘country.’ That which extends in this way is no longer properly ‘urban’—either from the perspective of urbanism or from that of urbanity—but megapolitical, metropolitan, or co-urbational, or else caught in the loose net of what is called the ‘urban network’” (page 33).

Nancy criticizes this ‘urban network’ on the grounds that it is deracinated, starkly violent and unequal, a space marked by “inequality and apartheid” rather than the “dwelling, comfort and culture” that he identifies with the properly “urban milieu” (page 33). For Nancy agglomeration disperses the city such that it is no longer city at all, but a distended spatial network.

He casts the urban network as a kind of bare cityhood that “on the one hand, simply concentrates (in a few neighborhoods, in a few houses, sometimes in a few protected mini-cities) the well-being that used to be urban or civil, while on the other hand, proliferates what bears the quite simple and unmerciful name of misery” (page 33). The figure of the city here represents a lost compass or lost order, and Nancy associates it with a lost religious ordering of the city and world. “*Urbi et orbi*: this formulation drawn from papal benediction has come to mean ‘everywhere and anywhere’ in ordinary language. Rather than a mere shift in meaning, this is a genuine disintegration” (page 33). Instead of an *urbs* emplaced in an orbis, Nancy argues, there is just a conurbation, and this “network cast upon the planet—and already around it, in the orbital band of satellites along with their debris—deforms the orbis as much as the *urbs*” (page 33). He might have been more straightforward here regarding the sources of global misery, which are far likelier to be found in the political economy of social space than in its dispersal and loss of ordering per se. But in arguing that the centrifugal disbandment of the city forecloses its potential as place of common being, he raises genuine questions about urban imaginaries and the spatial organization of power in a global age.

It is important to place this discussion in the larger context of Nancy’s thought. Without it the multiple narratives of loss—loss of meaning, loss of order, loss of certainty, loss of cityhood—might suggest a nostalgic yearning for communal wholeness. But these readings should be rejected, as Nancy is no communitarian. When he writes of community, it is “community without communion” (1986, page 144). For Nancy (2000) all existence is coexistence; ‘being singular plural’ is the basic moment of the social. Otherness is originary, and “one appears to oneself insofar as one is already an other for oneself” (page 67). His larger political–philosophical project is to rethink community, identity, and the social from a postfoundationalism that specifically denies immanent wholeness or atomistic individualism (see Hutchens, 2005; James, 2006; Kellogg, 2005; Norris, 2000; Schwarzmantel, 2007; Welch and Panelli, 2007).

For Nancy the product of globalization is a compressed, conurbated planet, and it is not a nice place. It results from knitting together the planet into a sort of whole, but a whole without proper spacing, a totality that does not, in his view, provide an opening or a place for dwelling. What is this notion of mondialisation that he considers an alternative? Though he is clearly skeptical of the idea of complete emancipation or liberation, Nancy can be read to offer, if not a ‘way out’, then at least a critical response to the global–urban experience.

When Nancy affirms mondialisation, he means struggle “*to create the world*: immediately, without delay, reopening each possible struggle for a world” (2007a, page 54, original emphasis). A true world is “precisely that in which there is room for everyone: but a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely take place (in this world). Otherwise it is not a ‘world’ ” (page 42). This is a politics of plurality and difference. World forming means “sharing singularity (always plural)” (page 46). As he puts it, “A world is a multiplicity

of worlds”, and so being worldly requires egalitarian, communicative practices of “sharing out” and “mutual exposure” (page 109). But this should not be confused with garden-variety multiculturalism, liberal pluralism, or cosmopolitan consumerism—Nancy is pushing at something more radical. He blends together ideas from Spinoza, Marx, and Lacan and argues that world forming would be the “shared appropriation ... of what cannot be accumulated” based upon a human “excess of enjoyment” (page 46) beyond the realm of necessity.

Mondialisation is never one movement or project but “a thousand revolts, a thousand rages, a thousand creations” (pages 53–54). He invokes the spirit of struggle. It is definitely not the classical Marxian narrative of class struggle, an idea that “seems insufficient—precisely because it is a ‘figure,’ an organizing scheme, and because ‘struggle’ still refers to classical combat, force against force” (Nancy, 2007b, page 533). But Nancy argues, “Marx’s demand is not obsolete” (2007a, page 53). He is not aiming to repudiate the anticapitalist imagination but to reformulate the perspective from which that tradition can be articulated (see Nancy, 1992). Mondialisation is “a matter of creating the meaning” of this demand anew. Central to this ethic of struggle is the constant movement of the horizon of politics itself: “New forms of struggle or resistance are now being invented, or at least should be” (Nancy, 2007b, page 533).

Nancy sees mondialisation as a struggle for justice—“straightaway and definitively a matter of concrete equality and actual justice” (2007a, page 53). But it is, as he puts it elsewhere, “‘justice’ without foundation or end” (Nancy, 2007b, page 533), the meaning of which comes precisely from its permanent incompleteness, from the challenge of creating shared justice in a world without foundations. He offers a never-ending struggle to define justice as the true infinite and thus the counterpoint to the bad infinity of capitalist accumulation. Ultimately, mondialisation means “struggle precisely in the name of the fact that this *world* is coming out of nothing, that there is nothing before it and that it is without models, without principle and without given end, and that is precisely *what* forms the justice and the meaning of a world” (2007a, pages 54–55, original emphasis). As some commentators have noted (Gilbert-Walsh, 2000; Wagner, 2006), Nancy can appear to offer only a critical, negative politics. It is true that for all of his emphasis on creation his language surrounding mondialisation is permeated by negativity. But this refusal to foreclose is his central ethical and political gesture.

I would argue that Nancy makes an important critical contribution to the discourse of the global–urban. He invents a new language through which to interpret global agglomeration. The distinction between globalization and mondialisation makes possible a position from which one can critique at once techno-utopianism, nostalgic communitarianism, and market fundamentalism. Globalization is usually seen as a unidirectional process, the progressive expansion of economic reason and techniques across the planet. Nancy opens a complicating dimension: there are in fact dueling processes of world erasing and world forming. By calling our attention to these competing, antagonistic forms of being global, he reminds us that real globality involves creation, possibility, and equality.

But at the same time it does not reduce the critical power of Nancy’s arguments to suggest that he might ultimately be more interested in city and world as philosophical figures rather than as geographical or sociological ones. By seeing the problem of political community foremost as an existential dilemma—about how to exist with others in a world without pre-given sense—some crucial questions are never satisfactorily resolved and some important distinctions are elided. How can we think through spatial and social difference in the agglomerated world that Nancy describes? By understanding questions about the world as questions about existence *per se*, it becomes difficult to account for the inequalities and differential miseries that global denizens experience. The distinction between world and unworld may be too stark. Does globalization promote any new strategic sites or political opportunities? From his perspective, what are

we to make of informal, periurban housing, which, as represented in global ‘slum’ studies (Davis, 2007; Neuwirth, 2005), constitutes precisely a struggle for inhabitation in the midst of apparently uninhabitable agglomeration? The creation of worlds from within unworld suggests that globalism may be more ambivalent and contradictory than these seemingly absolute categories would allow.

Connected to this, the language of world and unworld misses those practices that proliferate both. It is one thing to make the argument that a world is not a world if it is not shared and does not have room for everyone. But it is easy to think of examples where one project for well-being, dwelling, and coexistence functions to block or destroy other competing projects—and it is difficult to see how an ethic of worldhood and inhabitation could help adjudicate between them. Contemporary political reason rarely faces an absolute choice between world or unworld. What is needed is more subtle language that attends to the complexity and mutability of concrete global–urban spaces.

Finally, is there anything about cityhood specifically that might encourage the sort of struggles that Nancy affirms? By connecting the violence of globalization to the loss of urban coherence and order, he leaves us with the suggestion that some sort of reurbanization could be part of the mondialisation of the world. But this seems to invoke an order of the city that is now impossible and, from Nancy’s own position, undesirable. If the classical connection between urbanism and polis is now decisively occluded by the urbanization of the world, can there be a new connection between urbanity and world-forming? Nancy suggests that this might be the case, but the point remains unclear.

3 Urban society and urban revolution

“Will you try to find a crack for freedom to slip through, silently filling up the empty spaces, sliding through the interstices? Good old freedom, you know it well. It needs a ‘world’, neither a completely empty nor a completely full one.”

Lefebvre (1995 [1960], page 124)

Compared with Nancy, Lefebvre anchors his account of globalization much more firmly in a story about the development of urban space itself.

“I’ll begin with the following hypothesis: Society has been completely urbanized

An urban society is a society that results from a process of complete urbanization. This urbanization is virtual today but it will become real in the future” (2003, page 1).

These lines open *The Urban Revolution*, one of many works where Lefebvre provides a picture of urban modernity in upheaval, transgressing older bounds in a process of global colonization. In *Right to the City* (Lefebvre, 1996, pages 61–181), originally from 1967; *The Urban Revolution* (2003), originally from 1970; in some of his 1970s-era texts recently published as *State, Space, World* (2009); and elsewhere, Lefebvre envisions the urbanization of society and the formation of planetary social space. Like Nancy, Lefebvre distinguishes between worldly inhabiting and global agglomeration, and attempts to think the former as an antidote to the injustices of the latter.

Lefebvre introduces a distinction between ‘the city’ and ‘the urban’, where ‘the city’ represents bounded, traditional cityhood, in contrast to ‘the urban’ or urban society, which is much more diffuse and attenuated. Lefebvre argues that there has been a shift “from the city to urban society” (2003, pages 1–22), a shift that coincides with the most recent phase of globalization and which necessitates a rethinking of social space in general. On more than one occasion (1996, page 123; 2003, page 15) he proposes a hypothetical scale, from zero to maximum urbanization. At the zero point he posits “‘pure nature’, the earth abandoned to the elements” (2003, page 7), or what he later calls ‘absolute space’. Moving outwards from the zero point, Lefebvre places the ‘political city’, the ‘commercial city’, and the ‘industrial city’,

respectively, the details of which do not concern us here. What does concern us is where Lefebvre placed (then-)contemporary society: near the maximum limit, in what he calls the 'critical zone'. This is a place of crisis where the industrial city is being dismantled and something new is emerging: "complete urbanization" (page 4). In this condition urbanization is not a by-product of industrialization or political authority but itself "becomes a productive force" (page 15). This process of the urban-becoming-global, of "generalized urbanization" (page 17), is partly what Lefebvre means by the phrase "urban revolution". Just as the industrial revolution marked the emergence of a new form of transformative, worldwide industry, so too the urban revolution marks the onset of a new phase of transformative, planetary urbanism.

In this process the morphologies of industrial urbanism do not disappear. Quite the opposite: the forms of traditional urbanism persist, but they are transformed and integrated with one another in a new way. "The 'urban-rural' relation does not disappear" but instead "intensifies itself down to the most industrialized countries"; likewise, "urban cores do not disappear" but instead "survive by transforming themselves" (Lefebvre, 1996, page 72–73). Neither downtown nor 'nature' disappears. What Lefebvre sees happening is the "implosion–explosion" (page 71) of the city, whereby urban society spreads across the entire globe in a process of continual, tumultuous uneven development.

Complete urbanization, it is clear, is not 'complete' in the sense of reaching an end stage or final destination. Urbanization links the world together, but it continues to change and develop. A continuum between zero and completeness implies quite strongly that Lefebvre sees global urbanization as a linear process. But this might be a misleading simplification on his part. Throughout his urban writings he describes a discontinuous history rather than the growth of a stable and scalable object. Urbanization moves, haltingly, in the direction of greater complexity, but nowhere does he mention any complete end state, and such an idea is not a necessary part of his thought.

In order to represent the integration–fragmentation of the world becoming global, Lefebvre uses a series of metaphors of human-made webs: networks, patchworks and fibers. He describes an "urban fabric" that "grows, extends its borders" (2003, page 3) and weaves together diverse corners of the globe. "More than a fabric thrown over a territory, these words designate a kind of biological proliferation of a net of uneven mesh, allowing more or less extended sectors to escape" (Lefebvre, 1996, page 71). As with similar motifs in Nancy, for Lefebvre the fabric imagery captures a number of important qualities of the global–urban. Through countless separate connectors, a network weaves together a decentered multitude of points. A patchwork is constitutively uneven; the 'thickness' of the urban fabric varies greatly. The idea of a fabric or blanket problematizes the relationship between whole and part. It is *not* that the global is 'the big' in contrast to something else, such as the local, that is 'the small'. Rather, like a textile or cloth, urban society is that form of social life where all points in a totality are potentially interactive with one another, albeit unevenly. It is a matter not of size but of relationships and qualities. The ubiquitous contemporary network-speak can be traced partly to mid-20th century urbanism (Wigley, 2001) to which Lefebvre is responding. But rather than affirming networked being as a form of technical efficiency or an ideal of antiessentialist freedom, Lefebvre uses the language of networks to capture the contradictory character of a type of social space that is at once "homogenizing", "fragmenting", and "hierarchizing" (2009, pages 212–216; see Brenner, 1997).

The urbanization of society is more than just a spatial process—it also involves forms of knowledge and frames for action. For Lefebvre, "The urban problematic, urbanism as ideology and institution, urbanization as a worldwide trend, are global facts" (2003, page 113). The concept of the *problématique* was in wider circulation in 1960s French Marxist

thought, especially associated with Louis Althusser. For Lefebvre to say that the urban problematic becomes global is not to make a claim about the totalization of any particular urban form. Rather, it is to say that what becomes planetary is the urban as a question, as a theoretical framework, as a conceptual object of struggle. “Urban questions and movements ... emerge, they appear and disappear pretty much everywhere in the world. The problems posed by the modern city... are worldwide problems” (2009, page 282). By ‘urban problems’ we can understand not crime or congestion but the question of producing social space in the world-as-city.

As with Nancy, Lefebvre’s conception of the urban planet focuses on the unequal, and dominating, nature of social and economic life therein. Urban life threatens to destroy the planet in an act of “terricide” (2009, page 278). Quoting René Thom, Lefebvre refers to planetary space as a “space of catastrophe” (page 246), distinguished by a number of dangers: exploitation, inequality, and class domination; environmental degradation; stultification and oppression in the form of state-socialist and state-capitalist planning; the quotidian “terrorism” of the “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” (2003, page 4; Lefebvre, 1984). Planetary urban space is, above all else, a space of “violence”, where “a formidable force of homogenization exerts itself on a worldwide scale, producing a space whose every part is interchangeable (quantified, without qualities)” (Lefebvre, 2009, page 204). Lefebvre’s urban planet is a manifestly unequal globe dominated by brutal political and economic instrumentalities.

To a large extent, then, Lefebvre and Nancy present very similar criticisms of the global–urban. Lefebvre writes, “Mounting a critique of the confusions surrounding the term ‘world’ may be increasingly a key issue for reflective thought” (1995, page 254). Like Nancy, and drawing on their shared Heideggerian influence, Lefebvre sees the creation of the world as a technological product as the loss of the world that can only be rectified through political praxis (see Turnbull, 2006). But Lefebvre does not conceptualize the violence of globalization through the category of ‘unworld’, and as a result, compared with Nancy, his account is much more contradiction laden and paradoxical. Precisely because global urbanism universalizes, socializes, and totalizes society, it lays the foundation for its own critical resistance. To some extent, for Lefebvre the problematic of worldhood activates older associations with political agency in new ways. “The *world* revolution—through which the world will become a ‘world’—is happening, in ways that are stranger, richer and more unexpected than were ever imagined a century ago” (Lefebvre, 1995, page 250m, original emphasis). But he emphasizes that social conditions have changed since 19th-century *laissez-faire* industrial capitalism and so too must the radical imagination. In the early 1960s, channeling Rimbaud, Lefebvre wrote, “Revolution must be reinvented, but first we must recognize—re-cognize—it!” (page 238). By the late 1960s he was arguing that revolution, through which the world could become worldly, should be rethought as *urban revolution*.

Despite his scathing criticisms of the global–urban fabric, in “urban life” Lefebvre still sees an irreducible opening or opportunity, what he calls the “*non-closing* of the circuit” (1984, page 188, original emphasis). Whereas Nancy conceives of something similar as an opening onto the sharing of singular-plurality, Lefebvre offers the more concrete project of a reactivation of the political possibilities of urbanism itself. A reconceived, transformed, and transformative urbanism—which was an uneasy suggestion for Nancy—is at the center of Lefebvre’s notion of the urban world. Another meaning of the phrase ‘urban revolution’ thus emerges. It not only can be understood as a way to describe radically changed social relations but can also be used in a more intentional sense—as a transformation that is actively sought, rather than only experienced. Lefebvre’s position is that, with the shift from industrial society to urban society, the politics of resistance and emancipation can no longer be located

within the industrial experience and instead must be found within the urban experience. The emergence of the global–urban makes possible, but does not guarantee, urbanism as a new kind of transformational politics.

Elsewhere, Lefebvre invokes “the ghost of revolution” (1995, page 237), and here there is a similar sense of postmortem return. The condition of possibility for the right to the city is the death of the city. He writes that the “city historically constructed is no longer lived and is no longer understood practically. It is only an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for aestheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque.” But despite the end of the city, “the *urban* remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality, as kernel and virtuality” (Lefebvre, 1996, page 148). In other words, beneath the spectacular but cruel global cityscape there remains some hard core of critical potentiality within urbanism itself. The eternal return of radical urban movements across the world would seem to be a manifestation of this idea. Hence Lefebvre declares: “Urban life has yet to begin” (page 150). This paradoxical claim—that the city is over but some new, truer urbanism has in fact not yet even begun—is the center of Lefebvre’s critical stance.

I would argue that it is in fact only in this context that one can properly understand Lefebvre’s notion of the ‘right to the city’. It is often glossed as the “right to urban life” or the right to inhabit (1996, page 158; see Harvey, 2008; Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2003) and discussed as a desired but not yet established claim to centrality, place, equality, public space, participation, and citizenship. But the right to the city must be more than a demand for the good life. It is arguably only against the backdrop of the *end* of the city, and its replacement by urban society, that the concept of the right to the city can be seen in its fully ironic originality. Lefebvre is not urging some sort of return to the existing city. He is challenging urban inhabitants to develop *new* spaces, institutional forms, and political frames.

What does this mean for Lefebvre in essence to replace a narrative of politics rooted in the contradictions of industrial capitalism with one rooted in the contradictions of global urbanism? It means that resistance will not primarily come from industrial contexts and conflicts; it will come from urban conflicts, in all of their complexity. His picture of urban revolution is, like the idea of mondialisation, a political ethic that affirms, in an abstract way, local struggles in their singularity as prime examples of worlding. Lefebvre’s urban revolution would “gather the interests (overcoming the immediate and the superficial) of the whole society and firstly of all those who *inhabit*” (1996, page 158, original emphasis). A movement of this sort would agitate for social capacities of urban inhabitation—a question not only of housing but also of the capacity to collectively produce urban space more generally.

Lefebvre wants an urbanism that breaks down unequal “segregation” and strengthens pluralistic and egalitarian “difference” (2003, page 133). And he proposes a radical program of “urban reforms” to change urban capitalism and urban institutional structures as far as possible, a reformism that he thinks can become “revolutionary” (Lefebvre, 1996, page 154) if pushed far enough. He wants radical urbanism to make a space for audacious, utopian, unrealistic “planning projects” (page 155) that might help urbanites to rethink what is possible or desirable, as part of a larger effort to radically transform urban planning. In other words, Lefebvre envisions an urban social movement that will address itself towards all of those practices that produce urban space in global conditions. His line here is not necessarily consistent. By the original 1974 publication of *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]) he seems to have jettisoned the phrase, if not the notion, of the right to the city. But even in that work there is the sense that, as a politics of space, as a spatial problematic, urbanism still holds critical potential.

As Peter Marcuse (2012) has recently pointed out, the notion of the ‘right to the city’ makes sense only if Lefebvre is arguing for a revolutionary transformation of economy and

politics. If ‘the city’ is understood to be any actually existing city, then Lefebvre is imagining a movement that is, by his own reasoning, impossible both logically and practically. If the city has ended, then the right to the city is the right to nothing. The city that Lefebvre imagines, then, must be a future version of the urban world, one that has yet to come into existence. This might be utopianism, but it is utopianism based upon a critique of the urban world as it exists. He sees globalization–urbanization as that process which produces planetary urban space—and thus imagines that a radical urban politics is not only still possible but also the only possibility. Whatever specific form this takes—radical environmentalism, some kind of regionalist anarchism or municipal socialism are all plausible applications—a faithful understanding of Lefebvre’s conception of urban society must always emphasize his insistence on urban revolution that transforms the global urbia rather than merely reveling in it.

Lefebvre’s position here raises a number of problems, many of which stem from the fact that his critical utopianism can be easily misunderstood, misconstrued, or forgotten. Without an insistence upon political–economic transformation, the affirmation of urbanism can easily degrade into cheerleading for conspicuous neighborhood consumption, ‘smart’ technocracy, or renewal-as-gentrification—the sort of policies that a segment of planners, politicians, and real-estate developers pursue everywhere in the name of ‘livability’ and the ‘creative’ city. Today, precisely when older critical perspectives have been abandoned, discourses about dwelling, inhabitation, the right to the city, indeed urbanism itself, always threaten, as if by radioactive decay, to lose their critical content and sink back into a neoliberal lifestyle politics. Lefebvre’s critical urban theory clearly provides the conceptual resources with which to resist such a reading. But that particular understanding of the concepts of dwelling and inhabitation is an ever-present possibility in today’s political scene.

Even if the right to the city is not mistaken for neoliberal urbanism, there are some other questions to be raised. There is still no fully developed theory here about the mechanics of how planetary urban space will contribute to its own transformation—there is mostly the suggestion that it can and should. There is no real account here of how, say, public space, critical planning, or the urban process more generally might encourage a transformative urban politics, and there is no theory about how to handle clashes of interests between different urban inhabitants. Indeed, there is still little here about the specificity of the urban itself, and Lefebvre often appears to be urging a more general politics of inhabitation. This would not, in itself, be a problem, but it raises the question once more about the persistence of the urban in his urban revolution.

And while we can accept his point about the centrality of urban conflicts in contemporary struggles, we should be careful in distinguishing between the urban and the industrial. In a world filled with mass-produced commodities the notion of the end of industrialism is highly questionable, and Lefebvre would be the first to stress that industrial conflicts do not disappear. We can accept his arguments that urban politics are not reducible to industrial politics and have become relatively more central, the more that the urban fabric thickens across the globe. But we still need to clarify the complex relationships between industrial and urban struggles.

Ultimately, however, I do not think that these questions undermine Lefebvre’s more basic goal. It is clear from the tone of his urban writings that his aim is less to provide a complete political sociology of urban society than it is to open a conceptual space within which a transformation of the urban globe can be imagined. Certainly, important theoretical questions remain. But he clearly succeeds at the important task of crafting a new critical vocabulary for global–urban society.

4 Conclusion: the world as an opening

“*Globalization* names a process which universalizes technology, economy, politics, and even civilization and culture. But it remains somewhat empty. The world as an *opening* is missing The thing that is called *globalization* is a kind of *mondialisation* without the world.”

Kostas Axelos (2005, page 27)

As I have argued, the global–urban imagination is becoming central to the present age. One recent event where the political connotations of the urban age discourse were particularly striking was the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, which had the theme of “A Better City, A Better Life”. It is typical of world fairs to combine nation branding and technological demonstrations with a “culture of heroic consumption” (Ley and Olds, 1988). But this event was perhaps unique in the extent to which it linked the themes of urbanization and planetary existence with the promotion of a supposedly benign urban techno-utopia. In pavilions named City Being, Urban Footprint, Urban Future, Urban Planet, and Urbanian a series of exhibits offered a vivid journey across our planet, taking as its starting point the inevitability of technocratic statecraft, universal urbanization, and manageable climate change. Videos, models, and dioramas displayed planning techniques, corporate accomplishments, lifestyle innovations, engineering schemes, and scientific achievements from around the world that will solve the logistical and environmental problems of the present and future. In an exhibit on ‘utopias’ and ‘ideal cities’, columns were decorated to resemble piles of giant-sized editions of key books in urban studies, including *Spaces of Hope*, *Invisible Cities*, *The City in History*, *The New Atlantis*, and *The Urban Revolution*. The room suggested that the cities of the future will be supported by the utopias of the past. But only the books’ spines were visible. And in all of the materials on city planning and urban design nowhere was anything mentioned that resembled democracy or participatory politics.

The specifics of contemporary Chinese capitalism and politics notwithstanding, Expo 2010 presented one of the most common uses of the motif of an urban planet. Through text, graphics, and architecture the expo communicated the message that technology and density will carry humanity forward to a harmonious future, to a world that will be interconnected even as it will continue to be structured by walls and barriers. It suggested that the horizon of politics lies in the development of progressively smarter solutions by an alliance of business, science, and authoritarian state and city governments. The global–urban problematic, from this perspective, is above all a question of efficiency and proper management, where political contentiousness, like pollution, is one more problem to be solved.

The way in which the world is imagined has real consequences, because it can open or foreclose possibilities for action. Nancy and Lefebvre’s understandings of globalization can help sensitize us to the images of the world produced at megaevents like Expo 2010. From their perspectives the horizon of global–urban politics is definitely not to be found in ‘best practices’ that place the power for shaping the world in the hands of corporate strategists and technocratic experts. An unequal, administered globe would be precisely the airless agglomeration that they decry. Instead, Lefebvre and Nancy both argue for a politics of *mondialisation* as an alternative to technocapitalist globalization. The two of them approach this thought differently—Lefebvre looks to transformational urbanism while Nancy looks to singular-plurality. But they share a way of problematizing urban globality. Their perspectives can help us see anew the violence of global urbanization as it has developed so far. And they can also help us envision the possibilities for transformation that an urban world might still contain.

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