

Antinomies of Space-Time Value: Fallowness, Planning, Speculation

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The production of space is at the same time its valorization.
—Elmar Altvater¹

Fallowness. The condition of a resource or productive force set aside to accumulate potential value to be extracted or realized afterward.

History

In England, until the wave of enclosures that enabled the Industrial Revolution, the main agricultural regions used an open field system that facilitated the coexistence of subsistence farming, production for the market, and various modalities of commoning. Within these local and collectively planned arrangements, fallow land was considered “commonable” land. Private property that was left untilled could be pastured in common so that nutrients from cattle manure improved soil capacity and structure.² This complex design superimposed ownership and possession of land, making it possible for smallholders to augment potential yield value while simultaneously securing immediate use values that benefited all commoners, complementing their livelihoods and partially resolving their reproduction outside the market.³ Together with common land and common rights, this system—which kept one-third to one-half of all parish territory under communal regime for centuries—disappeared with the parliamentary enclosure campaigns that swept the English Midlands in the 18th and 19th centuries. Subsequent property regimes were simpler and exclusive. Under the banner of modernization, large landholders and a new generation

of agriculturists and surveyors disseminated an ideology of “improvement” that gradually abandoned fallowing or replaced it with a fodder crop system to maximize soil productivity and accelerate the turnover time of capital.⁴ Improvers couldn’t stand idleness, regardless of whether it referred to a quality of land or to poor commoners “wasting” productive time by contemplating their grazing livestock instead of embracing wage discipline as day laborers. The myth of productivity and efficiency, however, was misleading. By the 1840s intensive farming had leached the soil of its nutrients in several regions and agricultural yields were gradually decreasing. To replenish lost soil capacity a new international trade in natural fertilizer—guano—arose, whereby Britain deprived communities in poor nations of traditional sources of phosphate and nitrogen, causing severe environmental degradation at the periphery of the world-economy.⁵ At the same time much of the enclosed land was seized with a speculative aim or simply to accumulate property and secure social status—in such cases the land remained untilled for decades or was directly incorporated by booming industrial towns to absorb urban development.⁶

During the 19th century, the crisis of social reproduction caused by the separation of smallholders and propertyless commoners from the land deepened in big cities, which had become home to legions of the dispossessed. Under laissez-faire capitalism, urbanization was the lubricant for novel forms of accumulation that combined the acceleration of productive cycles and the hyper-exploitation of labor power and space in dense working-class neighborhoods with a new mode of fallowing: land speculation in programmed town extensions, where building lots were intentionally left vacant for decades until their value reached an inflated level. Against this background, informal alternatives developed that prioritized immediate spatial use value over artificially delayed exchange value. Empty parcels on the outskirts of cities such as Berlin and New York were occupied by garden colonies and shantytowns: rural underworlds where squatters and unruly proletarians created a sense of community and self-managed natures at the margins of the bourgeois vision of the new periphery

and normalized citizenship.⁷ Towards the last third of the 19th century, however, growing social conflict and intensified reproduction crises sparked a wave of urban reformism that introduced yet another iteration of fallowness. Parks, schools, adequate housing, and increased leisure time were understood as realms in which to restore and cultivate the value latent in workers’ bodies and minds, and in their offspring. These novel spatial arenas would reshape municipal governance and urbanization. A mode of programmed waiting as opposed to mere speculation, the dawn of planning heralded a new shift in the dialectic of fallowing, by attempting to sustainably regulate human value creation through space, in time. However, ecological resources in general were not considered in the same light. To name only the most salient and ambitious scheme at the time, there were no idle or fallow spaces in Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City concept, which instead sought to maximize functionality, through territory saturated with activity.⁸

In the early 20th century reform movements ushered in a progressive era that created welfare formations in core capitalist countries as a governmentalization of fallowing through, among others, the rationalization of economic development and state absorption of the externalities of a relentlessly expanding industrial world. Marked by a violent process of modernization and intermittent crises, Germany was an especially interesting laboratory in this regard. Innovative state mediation of national social and economic life sparked debate on the productive or unproductive character of public investment, with different alliances of capital and civil society defending antagonistic value schemes with specific articulations of the urbanization process.⁹ At the turn of the century, Frankfurt mayor Franz Adickes promoted a strategy to amass municipal land for future development, quintupling public property on the city’s outskirts.¹⁰ Other large cities soon adopted the same scheme. Set aside for decades, these land reserves enabled the implementation of famous public facilities and social housing programs during the Weimar Republic in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Hamburg. Politicians and technicians were explicit about the role of this social infrastructure in

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Elmar Altvater, “Ecological and Economic Modalities of Time and Space,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 1 (1989): 59–70.

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Joan Thirsk, “The Common Fields,” *Past & Present* 29 (1964): 3–25, 3.

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Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, “Territory and the Governmentalisation of Social Reproduction: Parliamentary Enclosure and Spatial Rationalities in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012): 209–19.

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Gregory Clark, “Too Much Revolution: Agriculture in the Industrial Revolution, 1700–1860,” in *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective*, ed. Joel Mokyr (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 212.

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Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, “Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift: Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50 (2009): 311–34.

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Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, “Urbs in Rure: Historical Enclosure and the Extended Urbanization of the Countryside,” in *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, ed. Neil Brenner (Berlin: Jovis, 2013), 236–59.

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Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 64–73; Mark Hobbs, “‘Farmers on Notice’: The Threat Faced by Weimar Berlin’s Garden Colonies in the Face of the City’s *Neues Bauen* Housing Program,” *Urban History* 39 (2012): 263–84.

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Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (London: Sonnenschein, 1902), 25–26, diagram 2.

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David Abraham, “Conflicts within German Industry and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic,” *Past & Present* 88 (1980): 88–128.

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Jan Abt and Alexander Ruhe, *Das neue Frankfurt. Der soziale Wohnungsbau in Frankfurt am Main und sein Architekt E*

securing the reproduction of a high-quality workforce, then considered the country's main asset at a time of increased international competition. This form of human-resource fallowing required the "subtraction" of workers from the factory during the years of childhood, as well as during hours of leisure time spent in city parks, sports facilities, or at home. Progressive municipal schemes, however, were hindered by the national bloc of heavy industry and conservative parties and authorities, including the Reichsbank, which considered them unproductive expenditures. These agencies argued that public investment instead be used for immediately valuable endeavors such as ad hoc subsidies for industrial capital.¹¹

Although more modest in ambition, early federal initiatives devised by Franklin D. Roosevelt's "brain trust" of advisors in New Deal America met similar opposition that blocked some of the boldest attempts to expand public services and implement regional planning across the nation, including projects like the Greenbelt Town program.¹² Here, however, another example can be found of the growing schism between the cultivation and extraction of human and nonhuman value under capitalism. A quintessential form of urban fallowing, the concept of using greenbelts of farmland and parks to structure metropolitan development was at odds with another aspect of New Deal resettlement programs. In distressed regions, rural planning initiatives by state agencies like the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the US federal government promoted chemical fertilizers in campaigns to increase agricultural output and accelerate value cycles.¹³ The rift between social and environmental reproduction schemes was artificially enlarged as a result of the tensions of industrial expansion.

Postwar Keynesian arrangements consolidated previous modes of fallowing labor power while securing unprecedented growth rates in industrial farming and manufacturing. By the 1960s, however, this system was already fraught with problems at various levels across the core capitalist countries. On one hand, behind the facade of social policy and welfare programs, capital established a new hegemony around its own agenda in the sphere of valorization. Conventional unions gradually focused on wage

struggles, increasing workers' share in value creation only to realize it as purchasing power. At the same time, some population groups in advanced capitalist countries—including students and young metropolitan proletarians—refused the condition of fallowed labor power in a challenge to dominant schemes of reproduction. In Italy, where these forms of resistance were linked to both working-class protests and urban social movements, the rejection of work and consumerism nurtured the revitalization of qualitative value based on self-management, or what Antonio Negri and other activists termed "self-valorization."¹⁴ This "use-value movement," to borrow Franco Piperno's phrase,¹⁵ saw the emergence of a "revolutionary historical subject" and the "passage from wage struggle to the struggle over appropriation." According to Negri this shift would eventually "break capital's margins of valorization" by reconquering new "space[s] for workers' valorization."¹⁶ In the ensuing decades a wave of autonomous social centers and liberated spaces spread across abandoned sites in Italy and elsewhere.¹⁷ These movements productively repurposed fallowness by transforming transitory sites into prefigurative territories, interrupting the conventional real estate value system to allow for alternative, collectively organized use values.

In recent years, expanding and accelerating value chains have triggered new mutations in fallowing regimes. While none of the aforementioned processes were exclusive to core capitalist countries, the current trend towards planetary urbanization has not only produced a worldwide explosion of the urban fabric, but also of accumulation strategies linked to the secondary circuit of capital and the financialization of real estate markets.¹⁸ Land grabbing and the acquisition of devalued property by vulture funds illustrate the prominent role of global corporate landlords and real estate investment trusts in the emergence of a new frontier of fallowing.¹⁹ Today, as at the dawn of agrarian capitalism, many of these transactions are purely speculative. Large tracts of land seized in Africa and Latin America remain idle after the expulsion of local populations, while social housing units snapped up by foreign investors in distressed countries such as Greece, Ireland, or Spain lie empty after evictions. But unlike earlier forms of

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Ben Lieberman, "Luxury or Public Investment? Productivity and Planning for Weimar Recovery," *Central European History* 26 (1993): 195–213.

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Joseph L. Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program 1935–1954* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971).

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Darrell A. Russel and Gerald G. Williams, "History of Chemical Fertilizer Development," *Soil Science Society of America Journal* 41 (1977): 260–65; Walter William Wilcox, *Planning a Subsistence Homestead* (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Agriculture, 1934), 9.

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Antonio Negri, *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy* (London: Verso, 2005), 180–230; Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro: 1968–1977: la grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Roma: Feltrinelli, 1997). For an architectural approach to the Autonomia movement, see Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture within and against Capitalism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).

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Franco Piperno, "Autonomia possibile, valore d'uso, lavoro non-operaio," *Metropoli* 1 (February 1978), pre-print.

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Negri, *Books for Burning*, 18, 60.

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Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting* (London: Verso Books, 2017), see especially 150–83 for the case of Italy; see also Bart van der Steen, Ask Karzeff, and Leendert van Hoogenhuijze, eds., *The City Is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe from the 1970s to the Present* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014).

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Neil Brenner, "Theses on Urbanization," *Public Culture* 25 (2013): 85–114; Kevin Fox Gotham, "Creating Liquidity out of Spatial Fixity: The Secondary Circuit of Capital and the Subprime Mortgage Crisis," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33 (2009): 355–71; Neil Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," *Antipode* 34 (2002): 427–50.

speculation, today these dormant spaces are incorporated as underlying assets in real estate derivatives and hedge funds to leverage ongoing or expected food, raw material, and energy crises, or to inflate prospective building and housing capacities that do not match the reality of lackluster local economies.²⁰ Under such conditions of deepened financialization, virtual use values transform into marketable values almost instantaneously, making fallowing immediately profitable. The same goes for reproductive realms beyond the built environment, as in the case of the privatization and equitization of welfare services like health care and education, or the penetration of financial logic into everyday life and the household.²¹ The current trend to commodify or financialize spheres of fallowing paradoxically renders them instantly lucrative. Futures—use-value futures—are seen as merely triggering accumulation in virtual circuits and their actual realization risks becoming a residual feature. In this situation urbanization again assumes the form of an infrastructural apparatus to extract value on a planetary scale, and planning—once a regulatory framework to fallow both space and labor power—is simply eclipsed in the context of unprecedented crises of reproduction.

Theory

Fallowness is one of many configurations of labor power, space, and time engineered to generate value. The variety of these configurations can articulate productive, reproductive, and regulatory strategies in complex and often contradictory arrangements. Fallow resources are productive forces purposefully left idle to increase their value-added capacity and profitability in the future, but they can also support more sustainable socioecological and economic orders by rationalizing production flows to prevent excess and “avoid surplus.”²² In other words, these practices express the dialectical tension between speculation and planning. This ambivalence is also embedded in

valorization struggles between antagonistic economic blocs and grassroots initiatives striving to build alternative worlds based on forms of counter-value.

Such valorization struggles around fallowness comprise three fundamental dilemmas: a) an ontological conflict over what defines value, what contains or generates value, and what is or is not productive; b) an operative conflict over the goals of valorization, the tension between qualitative and quantitative value, or between use and exchange value; c) a temporal conflict over the proper moment in which to realize value, and the programming of circuits of production, consumption, and reproduction. Under capitalism, regimes of accumulation rely on different arrangements around these three axes to maintain and expand its system; thus diverse formations of fallowness emerge giving such regimes their historically specific contours. At the same time, this process is overdetermined by a broader dialectic of capitalist development with two contrasting structural features: a) the “annihilation of space by time” (or the “usurpation of space”) as a result of the system’s drive to remove all spatial, territorial, natural, and cultural impediments so as to minimize the circulation time of capital;²³ b) the ecological and reproductive limits that environments and socionatural formations impose on the expansion and intensification of capital accumulation.²⁴ This tension has been summarized by different theorists as a “contradiction between economy and ecology,”²⁵ a second (i.e., environmental and reproductive) contradiction of capitalism,²⁶ or a “metabolic rift”²⁷ indicating that the overall expansion of the capitalist system makes social and environmental reproduction incompatible.

The brief discussion above suggests that specific fallowing formations are the path-dependent, variable outcome of the interplay between valorization struggles and broader structural contradictions of capital, and thus cannot be subsumed under a singular interpretive key linking certain socionatural configurations with specific political agencies, productive agendas, and regulatory schemes.

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Joe Beswick et al., “Speculating on London’s Housing Future: The Rise of Global Corporate Landlords in ‘Post-Crisis’ Urban Landscapes,” *City* 20 (2016): 321–41; Saturnino M. Borras and Jennifer C. Franco, “Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12 (2012): 34–59; Philip McMichael, “The Land Grab and Corporate Food Regime Restructuring,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39 (2012): 681–701.

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See, for example, Luigi Russi, *Hungry Capital: The Financialization of Food* (London: Zero Books, 2013); Manuel B. Aalbers, “The Financialization of Home and the Mortgage Market Crisis,” *Competition & Change* 12 (2008): 148–66; Michael Byrne, “Entrepreneurial Urbanism after the Crisis: Ireland’s ‘Bad Bank’ and the Redevelopment of Dublin’s Docklands,” *Antipode* 48 (2016): 899–918; Daniel Coq-Huelva, “Urbanization and Financialization in the Context of a Rescaling State: The Case of Spain,” *Antipode* 45 (2013): 1213–31.

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See, for example, Lena Lavinas, *The Takeover of Social Policy by Financialization: The Brazilian Paradox* (New York: Springer, 2017); Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

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The Oxford English Dictionary emphasizes this aspect in the main entry for “fallow.”

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Altwater, “Ecological and Economic Modalities,” 60; David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 35–45; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 524, 539.

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John Bellamy Foster, “Capitalism and Ecology: The Nature of the Contradiction,” *Monthly Review* 54 (2002): 6–16; Jason W. Moore, “Environmental Crises and the Metabolic Rift in World-Historical Perspective,” *Organization & Environment* 13 (2000): 123–157.

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Altwater, “Ecological and Economic Modalities,” 60.

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James O’Connor, “Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 1 (1988): 11–38.

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John Bellamy Foster, “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (1999): 366–405.

That is, different fallowing strategies can be pursued, defended, and attacked by both the elite and the oppressed, with different goals. Throughout history, fallow land, fallow space, and fallow labor—much like wastelands, abandoned architectures, and surplus populations—have been framed by different social blocs as either idle or profitable in the long run, as barren or productive, as an unacceptable limit on collective prosperity, a balanced approach to resource exploitation, or merely an asset in larger value compounds regardless of actual use. Agrarian, industrial, and financial formations of capitalism—and the diverse expressions thereof—use different configurations and representations of space, time, and labor, and different inflections of fallowness, to generate, rationalize, or expand value chains according to the needs and expectations of historically specific capital and class compositions. Rather than attempting to trace a single genealogy for value allocation, distribution, and appropriation in time and space, the challenge for a politics of design is to elucidate the agency regulating these processes, and to evaluate their potential impact on urbanization and other forms of spatial production. Although the trajectories of fallowing cannot necessarily be determined in advance, the brief overview above suggests certain structural regularities, which I delineate here as a preliminary, tentative synthesis.

In a “double movement” similar to that theorized by economic historian Karl Polanyi, the historical fluctuation between production- and reproduction-oriented regimes of fallowness seems to ebb and flow between the commodification of land and labor, and protection against its excesses.²⁸ In terms of the structural patterns described above, this fluctuation expresses the ongoing tension between the usurpation of space and the attempt to address the metabolic rift and reproductive crises. States usually play a prominent role in both scenarios, but their regulatory apparatuses are more obviously present in the latter, as welfare agencies. During the earliest stages of original accumulation and industrial capitalism in the 19th century, the fallowing of land and labor was either marginalized or cast as part of a purely speculative scheme, in both cases bringing about severe environmental and social reproduction crises. Towards the end of the 19th century these conflicts animated state responses in the form of social policy and planning to secure social order, reduce environmental problems, and rationalize urbanization processes. The ensuing period of Fordist arrangements gradually incorporated a number of key externalities in the reproduction of the industrial system as a means of fallowing human resources, such as housing, urban public facilities, and education. At the same time, the fallowing of nonhuman resources rapidly declined as

industrial fertilizers, mechanization, and other techniques to accelerate value extraction eclipsed natural methods of restoring ecological capacities. Thus social and environmental reproduction were increasingly and artificially decoupled as the contradiction between economy and ecology deepened and the metabolic rift grew larger. With the onset of neoliberalism in the late 1970s many prior fallowing schemes were put under pressure and became vulnerable, including both natural and social reserves, and core welfare agencies such as public education and health care, social housing, and urban planning. In the realm of urbanization a new global logic has recently emerged that combines long-term investment in lands in remote territories and the speculative seizure of depreciated real estate in core urban areas, generating massive waves of displacement and dispossession across the world.

These conditions suggest that capitalism has had some success in its enduring attempt to eliminate dormancy and schedule diverse layers of accumulation across different markets to secure steady revenue flows. Through trading futures, fallowness is rendered immediately productive: exchange value is realized before prospective use values are generated, and virtual profits are engineered to replace wealth stored slowly over time by nonmarket agencies. But by accelerating the aptitude of certain spaces and resources to create value beyond their restorative capacities, these forms of artificial “fertilization” fuel new crises of reproduction, both socially and environmentally.

Against this longue-durée trend we can trace an alternative tradition of struggles to remove communities and ecosystems from the capitalist imperative for instant profitability and quantitative value. In commoning space and time, these experiences preserve use values either through a kind of combatant fallowing or by appropriating state fallows to establish platforms for alternative worlds. This tradition can be found among those who refuse to abandon common land or to give up common rights that render their households partially independent from wage labor, and in Luddite struggles against the “fertilization” of manufacturing with machine technologies. It is found in Paul Lafargue’s plea for laziness, in working-class sabotage and wildcat strike actions to seize control of the shop floor from Taylorist management.²⁹ It is also in the Surrealists’ praise of *flânerie* and sleep as productive activity, and in the calls of both the Situationist International and Henri Lefebvre to subvert the normalization of everyday life through revolutionary festivals.³⁰ It is the refusal of work and the operaist demand for self-management in Italy, the ethos of punk, the wave of autonomous spaces thriving in thousands of occupied social centers in late-20th-century Europe, and the Invisible Committee’s recent appeal to

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Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).

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Paul Lafargue, *Le droit à la paresse* (Paris: Oriol, 1883).

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Association Fédérative Générale des Etudiants de Strasbourg, *De la misère en milieu étudiant* (Strasbourg: Union Nationale des Etudiants de France, 1966), 28; Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 168.

embrace the “now” as an urgent political ontology.³¹ By breeding qualitative values, these self-valorization struggles are also formidable incubators of political hope for developing counter-territorialization and alter-urbanization strategies,³² initiatives in which communities and collectives craft alternative modes of coexistence with others and with ecosystems that may destabilize capitalism.

Design

Any form of fallowing is a project: a certain articulation of design and politics to organize space in time. Fallowing connects a particular configuration of sociomaterial orders—a specific allocation or restriction of access to resources—to a concept of production and its distribution as future wealth. But how should designers react to the ambivalence of fallowing, and its increasing commodification? What formations of fallowness should activist planning pursue and engage? Is it possible to mediate dormancy, vacancy, and productivity so as to reorganize landscapes, environments, and urbanisms in a progressive fashion? History suggests hybrid regimes that superimpose different territorialities and temporalities are more versatile and resilient—they can support unexpected forms of grassroots appropriation and provide a more robust ground to overcome endemic social and environmental contradictions. It is necessary, therefore, to devise schemes to combine institutionally endorsed forms of egalitarian and ecological reproduction with an open infrastructure to cultivate qualitative use values from the bottom up.

Planning cannot simply be reduced to a powerless, aestheticizing exercise of identification and administration of rent gaps over time. At minimum, to establish a “regime of rest” opposed to contemporary forms of speculation and accelerated accumulation, planning ought to regain its capacity to mediate and rationalize capital’s temporalities, inhibiting its inclination to annihilate use value with exchange value. Fallowness must be reappropriated as a regulatory category based on restoration, dilation, and slowness, to promote the enrichment of space by time. Planning’s fundamentally social-reproductive function should be reactivated, to bring back its unrealized drive to synchronize the economy with the pace of environmental recuperation and the cultivation of both individuals and communities. But these forms of state building are only a (reformist) beginning. Public apparatuses should be devised to create conditions of possibility for alternative praxes that escape institutional closure in imaginative, autonomous ways. Design can help prevent the functionalist ossification of fallow realms by developing a more

delicate understanding of the dormant potentialities of current spatial configurations. State apparatuses, public services, and urban infrastructures can be reinvented as open-ended machines to reserve spaces that other polities can subsequently transform. Grassroots collectives could take advantage of such state-run mechanisms to inhibit exchange value encroachments and prevent surplus, to forge new forms of commoning use values *hic et nunc*. Through the juxtaposition of state rest regimes and the self-valorization of idle space, fallowing may reveal a prefigurative potential as a transitory territoriality that allows the construction of alternative worlds in the meantime.

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Comité Invisible, *Maintenant* (Paris: Fabrique, 2017).

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Neil Brenner, *Critique of Urbanization: Selected Essays* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2017), 284–85.