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Voluntary Urbanism: The Agency of the City

Does an imperative for action exist today in urbanism? The emerging paradigm in urban studies today called “agency” refers to a simple matter of voluntary will. Actors and subjects of such actions, nonetheless, are complex, so that understanding them demands that we consider a variety of concepts. In western culture, philosophers considered agency (defined by the field of action) as by circumscribing human free will. In Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages, thinkers such as Aristotle and Aquinas made important contributions to philosophy centered on voluntary action. Conceptualizing modernity, writers like Giddens and Habermas focused on human action as rational order. Postmodern authors such as Deleuze and Badiou introduced concepts like cause, event and desire. In today’s altermodernity,¹ contemporary writers like Žižek, Hardt and Negri emphasize the uncertain human drive based in the power to act – being, loving, trusting, transforming, and creating. While both modernity and postmodernity claimed freedom of thought and expression, respectively, alter-modernity claims freedom of action. Thus, in contemporary theory, agency (the voluntary act) finally emerges as an historical actor.

¹“Modernity: the triad “identity-sovereignty”, and Altermodernity: ‘singularity-the common-revolution.” Hardt and Negri refer to the possibility of a multitude of alternatives to the classical idea of modernity, in which capitalism will function without domination. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

Since then the term expresses agency's ability to act in an entity or person in the world, which means "the temporal-relational context of action."² But the action *tout court* is by nature an operative and interventional role, that is, "to be able to "act other-wise" means being able to intervene in the world."³

A key question is to define the ways in which the commons, the public and the private are articulated and can coexist, or what we are describing here as the agency of the commons. In the multicultural world that we live in, it is more interesting to say what brings us together than what divides us. In this light, one can interrogate the extent to which today's neoliberal paradigm divides humanity.

Recent years of financial crisis raise important questions about the neoliberal ideological system,⁴ in which, as Maas argues, "collective efforts are encountered or even replaced by individualism, where politics are uncertain and the swings of unpredictable economies discourage communal investments."⁵ This creates a situation where injustice and inequalities have created an urbanism of victims, where, as Negri asserts, "the metropolis is presented as a machine that empties the city of reality, a sociological field where each moment of stabilization is hypocritical and fleeting ... as empty

²M. Emirbayer and A. Mische, "What is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no.4 (2008): 970.

³*Ibid.*, 10.

⁴Neoliberalism is a form of political economic organizing that operates under the assumption that human development is best achieved when individual entrepreneurial freedom are liberated within the institutional frameworks of property rights, free markets, and trades." Quoted from David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

⁵W. Maas, "Towards an Urbanistic Architecture," in *The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, eds. Bernard Tschumi and Irene Cheng (New York: The Monacelli Press and Columbia Books of Architecture, 2003), 14.

spaces, panic, insecurity, screams and rage, infrastructural parasitism, and so on.”⁶

We can also see the informal city’s extreme urbanism, with its slums and favelas, as a demonstration of multiple struggles to achieve equity. As Žižek says, “the principal task of the 20th century is to politicize—organize and discipline—the destructed masses.”⁷ Certainly, inequality and poverty are profoundly evident. Globally, the top 20% holds more than 70% of the total world’s wealth.⁸ Inequality threatens economic stability and democratic rights in the city. This requires a new perspective on geo-politics, or as Negri continues to argue, a new concept of “poverty that history returns to us as wealth rather than origin, as desire-to-come rather than misery.”⁹ Because the city belongs to everyone, the urban has a universal value, it is the place where shared common interests or “the character of multiplicity of actions [will emerge as] the essential charm of the city.”¹⁰ If cities are to be resilient, equitable and inclusive, their residents must create it through their common will. These new forms of education and practice can help us to imagine different forms of voluntary urbanism.

⁶Antonio Negri, “On Rem Koolhaas,” *Radical Philosophy* 154 (March/April 2009), 48-50.

⁷Slavoj Žižek, “Censorship Today,” *AfterZero Archis* Volume no.18, no. 4 (2008), 46.

⁸“People Building Better Cities,” Traveling exhibition, 6 countries, 12 cities, India, Thailand, Brazil, Australia, South Africa, USA. A Global Studio project in collaboration with the Center for Sustainable Urban Development in the Earth Institute at Columbia University, and partners in exhibition cities.

⁹Antonio Negri, “Some thoughts on the Concept and Practice,” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2010), 165.

¹⁰P. Mendes da Rocha, “La ciudad es de todos,” in *Coleccion la cimbra*, num. 9, ed. Emilia Perez Mata (Barcelona: Fundacion Caja de Arquitectos, 2011), 16; emphasis editors’.

We live in an era in which the social order of the nation-states, class and traditional family is in decline.¹¹ Today's "exceptions" are poverty, homelessness, permanent unemployment or the "death drive" as common tragedy. This circumstance demands communal living and governance. To create such voluntary political arrangements, it will be necessary to move from perverted egoism to rational egoism, from Proletariat-Liberalism to Voluntariat, an ethics of virtue which operates through communal and mutual interactions such as generosity and reciprocity,¹² as gift economies, supported by contributions rather than taxes or fees. As Žižek says, "[I]nstead of taxing the rich excessively one should give them the (legal) right to decide voluntarily what part of their wealth they will donate to the common welfare."¹³ Even more important, the donation to the welfare state should be an act rather than a material contribution. Such acts will encourage fuller democracy since everyone will have to do it individually. It is in this light that we can speak of the agency of voluntary urbanism.

The agency of voluntary urbanism is based on acting in common while remaining in the self, a singularity within the multitude, with a man or woman seeing them both as a human being and as part of a community. Human agency is the antidote to passivity. It transforms

¹¹The "alternative" is recognized for its inherent sense of urgency for civil society. Žižek observes: "According to Hegel, the inherent structural dynamic of civil society necessarily gives rise to a class which is excluded from its benefits (work, personal dignity, etc.) - a class deprived of elementary rights, and therefore also exempt from duties towards society, an element within civil society which negates its universal principle. . ." (Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* [London: Verso, 1997], 163).

¹²For the concept of the ethics of "gift-giving" see Peter Sloterdijk, *Repenser I'* impot (Paris: Libell, 2012). See also "reciprocity" in Marcel Mauss, *Reciprocity, The Gift*, trans. Ian Cunnison (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954), 1-2, 3, 10-12, 69-77.

¹³Slavoj Žižek, "Beyond Envy and Resentment," in *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), 114.

humanity into a multitude capable of democracy, through “participating actively in government deciding on all the matters that concern them.”¹⁴ The agency of the self becomes a common habitus of ungovernable active minorities. In this sense the process of voluntary participation in government constitutes a political agency as a new mode of collective activity: the basis of a self-ruled multitude (learn to live and rule without masters). The moment of truth for the urbanist is finally a “self-constitutive collective action.”¹⁵ The power of voluntarism resides in the self-agency of the multitude. The intellectual and political courage to imagine egalitarian democracies are then expected to “lead to the production of the greatest collective *oeuvre*, the city.”¹⁶ The main task in creating this new city is not ideological but practical.

Today more than ever, it is important to build alternative worlds. Surprisingly, we can find alternatives already existing within society rather than in some imagined “outside.” One good example of voluntary

¹⁴Michael Hardt, *Michael Hardt presents Thomas Jefferson, The Declaration of Independence*, additional material by Garnet Kindervater (New York: Verso, 2007), xvi.

¹⁵Etienne de La Boetie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry J. Kurz (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975), 52-53 cited in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*. “What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal. Our lines of flight, our exodus must be constituent and create a real alternative. Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community. This project leads not toward the naked life of homo tantum but toward homohomo, humanity squared, enriched by the collective intelligence and love of the community.” (See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* [Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000], 204).

¹⁶E. Swyngedow, *Civic City Cahier 5: Designing The Post-Political City and the Insurgent Polis* (London: Bedford Press, AA Publications, 2011), 55.

urbanism is the volunteer fireman's community, a locally based group that provides social and emergency services.

As a case for communal urbanism, a fireman's life demonstrates a permanent and stable alternative community, balancing work and health. It is an alternative mode of life that has existed for centuries, rather than a counterculture invention such as a commune or a *faits divers*. In addition to housing firefighting services, the fire station provides several (temporary) common spaces [Figures 1, 2 and 3] such as the dining room, dorms, floor watch, toilets, etc. Living life in common means accepting duties and responsibilities, acting respectfully to others, and, most importantly, trusting your fellow firemen. This alternative set of social practices belongs to volunteers, who engage in civic intervention with both individual and collective consciousness. Their participation produces a "new civic and urban idea of solidarity."¹⁷

Being a fireman is a voluntary community service. Their services bring calm to the chaos of urban life. Their passion to help others creates a range of urban involvement from fighting fires to social services to emergency medicine, all of which provide, enable and sustain their capacity to successfully help and build a strongest city. The fireman, as a civic agent operates in the commonality of urban life and within fields of danger. The main purpose of the job is to save lives, reduce risk, provide humanitarian services and protect the environment in the most competent and effective manner possible. Firemen are called upon to tackle a wide range of emergency situations where problem solving skills and initiative will be vital to resolve incidents quickly and calmly. Since they act in emergency situations, as volunteers, they accept risk and act without reward. Žižek draws a similar picture when he states that "the act occurs

¹⁷J. M. Montaner and Z. Muxi, *Arquitectura Y Política- Ensayos para mundos, alternativos* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gil, 2011), 137.

in an emergency when one has to take the risk and act without any legitimization.”¹⁸

Could various types of urbanism become an unsolicited act, like that of the firemen? Voluntary urbanism is the development of such deliberate efforts, under material conditions which encourage free voluntary action to overcome unwillingness or passivity. In this sense, the urbanist today has to become a true action man or woman. This urban action approach attempts to go beyond concepts of political consensus and resistance to encourage agencied practices. Voluntary urbanism supports a new moment of experimentation based on our ability to create spaces and relationships, and transport them into action as part of a collective will for a common purpose. In short, the meaning of agency in the city is voluntary participation to both defend lost causes and enunciate new possibilities for urbanism.

The voluntary urbanist in the society (ignoring the structural constraints of privatization) should act with public objectives, communicating with institutions in order to contaminate them with positive thoughts, actions and collaborations. Their acts should aim for economic and political visibility, in order to communicate research and actions since there are, as Livesey argues, “problems for which there exists no program, no plan, no collective agency.”¹⁹ These problems call for new groups as yet undefined. This means building a real alternative civic society on the ability of volunteers to intervene, mediate and sustain new relationships, to build the foundations of a shared democratic urbanity.

¹⁸Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (New York: Verso, 2002), 153.

¹⁹G. Livesey, Agency, “Assemblages and Ecologies of the Contemporary City,” in *Agency: Working with Uncertain Architectures*, eds. Florian Kossak, Doina Petrescu, Tatjana Schneider, Renata Tyszczyk and Stephen Walker (Addington: Routledge, 2010).

Fig. 2 - The Common Room.
Los Angeles Fire Department
Historical Archive, Engine
Company No. 28, Cecil Lynch
Collection, circa 1950.



Fig. 1 - The Kitchen.
Los Angeles Fire
Department
Historical Archive,
Engine Company No.
28, Cecil Lynch
Collection, circa 1950.



Fig. 3 - The Rec-Room. Los Angeles Fire Department Historical Archive, Engine Company No. 28, Cecil Lynch Collection, circa 1950.

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Image Sources:

Fig. 1 - <http://www.lafire.com/stations/FS028/photos-CecilLynchCollection/CecilLynchCollection.htm>

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