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Abstract

This article analyzes the remarkable wave of metropolitan rebellions that inaugurated the 21st century around the world (2000–2016). It argues that they fuel an emergent politics of city-making in which residents consider the city as a collective social and material product that they produce; in effect, a commons. It investigates this politics at the intersection of processes of city-making, city-occupying, and rights-claiming that generate movements for insurgent urban citizenships. It develops a critique of the so-called post-political in anthropological theory, analyzes recent urban uprisings in Brazil and Turkey, distinguishes between protest and insurgent movements, evaluates digital communication technologies as a new means to common the city, and suggests what urban citizenship brings to politics that the national does not.

Keywords

cities, citizenship, commons, direct democracy, politics, rebellion, rights, social media, Brazil, Turkey

Associating Jacques Rancière and Mark Twain, I suggest in this essay that the “disappearance of politics” has been greatly exaggerated. Some current social theorists claim that our age is specifically “post-political” because the neoliberal capitalist world order generates consensus about its inevitabilities.¹

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Surely, however, it is historically accurate to say that strategies of consensus, depoliticization, and naturalization are enduring features of most if not all structures of power and do not, therefore, fundamentally distinguish our times from others. Moreover, as ethnographers and historians tend to show just as surely, such strategies never achieve complete hegemonies. They inevitably leave some people out of the consensus, and the excluded often, though not always, rebel either against their exclusions or more rarely and significantly against the consensus itself.

The evidence is, in fact, more compelling that we live in a time of extraordinary—and especially urban—rebellion in which the city has become once again the most salient site for a dramatic expansion of political life. In this sense, the domain of the political I refer to is the city itself and specifically the city-making activities of its residents, in which they produce the city through their lives and works as a collective social and material product; in effect, a commons. This is not the only domain of the political or of commoning, but city-making is today the most important in sheer scale and significance as it engages hundreds of millions of residents worldwide. In this making, residents often become aware of their rights and obligations to what they have produced and, *de facto* if not *de jure*, of the political organization of urban citizenship that arises out of their acting together.² On this relation between insurgent cities and urban citizenships—one that fuels an emergent political realm and a political life in the making of an urban commons—I focus my discussion.

Insurrection inaugurated the 21st century with a remarkable series of metropolitan rebellions. *Piqueteros* obstructed traffic in Buenos Aires at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, demonstrating new forms of social and political organization in the face of overwhelming economic exclusion. Mutinous Bolivians in Cochabamba blocked municipal highways in their struggles over water in 2000 and in El Alto over gas in 2003. Youth rose up in the Paris *banlieues* in 2005, burning cars and defying police. Protestors against the dispossessions of capitalism occupied the arteries and lungs of cities everywhere, beginning in 2009 in Athens and Reykjavik, spreading to Tunis, Cairo, New York, and Madrid in 2010 and 2011, erupting in Santiago and Phnom Penh by 2012, circulating through Istanbul and São Paulo in 2013, Caracas and Hong Kong in 2014, reaching Paris recently with the *Nuit Debout* movement, and finding its way to countless other cities around the world over the course of almost two decades.³

These insurrections have marked the beginning of the century with distinctive forms of action that share many features. They struck at the city itself, not the factory or government building as in previous centuries, but at the spaces of urban circulation and assembly, occupying and clogging them with new forms of convection. In many cases, protestors demanded that the state extend already existing rights. But in many others, protestors did not ask the state to change its behavior, to broaden its reach either through or by means of representative democracy. Instead, rejecting delegative politics, they stormed the state with alternative sources and conceptions of rights that arose out of their production of city life and that

were prefigured in their own processes of assembly and deliberation. Thus, their demands were not for inclusion into what was already a legitimated consensus of rule. They were rather for states to recognize the legitimacy and inevitability of rights that had emerged from their own life struggles in making the city and that they had fashioned on the anvil of alternative forms of political assembly. Such demands have occurred in other epochs. But for our time in the 21st century, they posit new *sources, scales, and subjects* of what counts as legitimately political—for example, the mass experience of the poor or of single mothers or of urban mobility—and advance this legitimacy not only as a focus for the development of new law, planning, and policy but also as a key issue of politics itself.

It is this intersection of city-making, city-occupying, and rights-claiming that generates movements for what I call a new kind of insurgent urban citizenship. It prevents us, I suggest, from declaring the city depoliticized and from overestimating the hegemony of neoliberal and authoritarian capitalism. It appears that contemporary cities consistently generate an insurgent political realm out of their very messiness, in which streets channel collisions of the strange and the familiar to produce uncertainty and exhilaration as the accelerants of political engagement. Regardless of their spatial organization, cities have historically been the most salient sites of the many kinds of uncertainties that unsettle entrenched political regimes: uncertainties about prospects for collective emancipation; uncertainties about the locations and exercise of power; uncertainties about the community of allegiance, its form of organization, and its manner of election and repudiation; uncertainties about the role of cultural identities in defining memberships; uncertainties about the political relations between nested territorial units such as city, region, nation, and empire. These uncertainties generate spaces of opportunity between people living together to act together. Such politics of uncertainty and disorder is evident, succinctly, in what a paralegal at the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant in Oakland, California, told my student, Benny Corona, during fieldwork for his senior honors thesis: “Where there is discrimination at work or abuse, undocumented people can fight back, as they have rights as citizens of the community; maybe not American citizens but citizens of the community.”

What community is she referring to? It is the political community of the city in contradistinction to that of the nation. This is both an ancient and a new identification. For the last four or five centuries the triumph of the nation-state over the city as the primary locus of citizenship (political community) has been overwhelming. In this triumph, the nation carries forward the classical idea of identification between a polity (state) and its citizens. However, new nationalisms notwithstanding, this identity attenuated as the state’s mission to govern transformed the nation into a political form of more or less autonomous housekeeping (Arendt) and disciplining (Foucault). The urban rebellions I discuss suggest growing antagonisms between city and nation-state as political communities. I do not mean that there is any necessary opposition between the two, and I know of no urban occupations that promote secession. Nor do they suggest that urban citizenship precludes national citizenship. Indeed, demands originating in some urban

occupations have forced changes in national politics, an example being the rise of the city-based Podemos as a national party in Spain.

However, states typically claim to dictate the qualifications of political citizenship and thus by definition exclude from political voice and representation the multitudes of urban residents who are not nationals. Coupled with the widespread state repression of undocumented urban residents, this exclusion sets up deep antagonisms in many cases between city and nation, as non-national residents are significant participants in urban rebellions, and national policies of immigration are often an explicit focus of protest. As I discuss later, such antagonism is especially pertinent in U.S. cases around issues of Sanctuary Cities and Municipal Identity Cards, both of which national authorities vigorously oppose. Moreover, the institutions of urban direct democracy that most uprisings have promoted are indeed subversive of other kinds of rule, including representative democracy. Thus, conflicts between cities and nations proliferate.

The rise of urban citizenships may also suggest that the nation-state as a political community has become increasingly distant for many urban residents, if not explicitly antagonistic. I mean that it is unable to offer them many opportunities for making a national political community with which to identify for purposes of acting together, except under extraordinary circumstances like war against “foreign enemies” or perceived “internal enemies” (e.g., “illegal aliens”), or major sporting events, which may explain the nation-state’s pronounced reliance on both war and sports. It seems reasonable to speculate that the urban rebellions also speak to a growing fatigue and emptiness of the nation-state as a political realm constantly at war (literally or figuratively), in need of enemies (in Schmitt’s sense) and war-like competition. I do not, however, suggest that the nation-state is unimportant for the development of insurgent politics. Rather, I focus on what urban citizenship articulates that the national does not.

In this context, as many researchers in the Aristotelian political tradition have observed, the city offers an emerging alternative for a different kind of political community. It is not that cities have not engaged in war, sports, and xenophobia. It is rather that in the daily life of cities, as Arendt puts it,

the political realm [of the *polis*] rises directly out of acting together, the “sharing of words and deeds.” Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it. The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. (1958: 198)

The political as intimate yet common; material yet in between. This conception of the political is not anchored in “disagreement,” though it includes conflict. As an “in between” it is also not “ontological,” if by that we are referring to the fundamental categories, entities, and nature of being. I therefore want to contrast an

ontological conception of the political as a category of human intentional life defined by antagonism with a pragmatic conception, one in which the political emerges as people make something in common. For Arendt (1958), the prerequisite of this making is the creation of what she calls “the space of appearance” that “comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action” (199). In Arendt’s analysis of the constitution of politics, the citizen power that sustains the existence of the public realm finds its actualization in this space of appearance, for “power . . . exists only in its actualization . . . and is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company” (200). Although the polis is not a physical location, the foundation of cities is “indeed the most important material prerequisite for power” (201) because cities provide an unparalleled density of opportunities for “the living together of people” (201) and thus for spaces of appearance and their pragmatics of power to come into being.

People may certainly disagree about their construction of such a commons, but conflict is only one of many possible relations between them. Surely, for example, the concept of caring is as vital to political engagement as that of disagreement; and, in any case, caring and disagreeing are not mutually exclusive. To posit agonism, antagonism, conflict, disagreement, dissensus, hostility, and *jus belli* as the fundament of political life to the exclusion of other conditions is, I would suggest, reckless given the diversity of possible modes for actualizing politics in the space of appearance; it is a kind of ontological imperialism. Rancière’s (1999) argument that “politics is the sphere of activity of a common that can only ever be contentious” (14) depends not only on a notion of dissensus as “a dispute over the object of the discussion and over the capacity of those who are making an object of it” (xii). It also presumes that the opposite of dissensus is a definition of “consensus,” which, by the philosopher’s fiat (and with implicit reference to Arendt), is totalizingly exclusive because it “presupposes [. . .] the disappearance of any gap between a party to a dispute and a part of society. It is the disappearance of the mechanisms of appearance, of the miscount and the dispute opened up by the name ‘people’ and the vacuum of their freedom. It is, in a word, the disappearance of politics” (102). I would suggest, however, that it is more than doubtful historically that dissensus is the only means to generate a space of appearance (a commons); and although it is certainly possible to account for the disappearance of politics under a variety of conditions—one being violence—it is also doubtful that consensus is ever totalizing enough to mean its eradication. It is more likely that some terms of consent are always necessary for bringing word and deed together.⁴

The limitations of this kind of antinomic binary logic to characterize the political is also evident in Schmitt’s (2007) ontological characterization of the political in terms of the opposition “enemy/friend.” The problem with this binary is not only its reductivism, ethnocentrism, and toxic masculinity. (Why are anthropologists, of all people, attracted to this 20th century tunnel vision?) It is also that Schmitt scarcely discusses “friend.” The antipode *jus amici* is essentially unexamined in his binary thought. It is not surprising, however, that Aristotle (1962)

devotes much attention, principally in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, to friendship in his analysis of the bonds that make the polis. In his view (Book 8: 1159b30), friendship gives different people “something in common, for that is also the extent to which they share a view of what is just.” Therefore “friendship also seems to hold states [*poleis*] together” (Book 8: 1155a23). Though ancient, this sense of the political as intimate yet common, material yet in between is again contemporary in cities.

Furthermore, I suggest in the course of this essay that disagreement is not sufficient either to ignite or to sustain political engagement. People often have the taste of disagreement in their mouths without having the force for political action. No doubt, politics is often shaped by disagreement and a sense of injustice. Urban rebellion of course expresses antagonism. But to ignite, it must also articulate a commoning of solidarities (e.g., the Paris *Commune*). The enactment of politics requires alliance, solidarity, trust, caring, talk—in short, a commoning—in addition to and even more than disagreement. In what follows, I first discuss the emergence of city-making as the commons of contemporary insurgent urban citizenships focused on the right to the city that residents produce. I then discuss notable features of recent urban rebellions and develop a distinction between protest and insurgence to understand why some social movements challenge existing hegemonies with an alternative politics while others, even in protest, perpetuate them. I end with a discussion of the insurgent politics of direct democracy, returning to the question of what urban citizenship brings to politics that the national does not.

Global peripheral urbanization, city-making, and urban citizenship, 1950–2000

The global urbanization of the last 70 years, particularly 1950–2000, resulted not in the reduction of the significance of place in the articulation of citizenship but in its re-emplacement from the imagined community of the nation-state to the much more tangible place of the city. In effect, a specific kind of global urbanization made the city the most salient site for the emergence of new forms and substances of citizenship, namely, the development of urban peripheries to house the vast majority of new urban residents.⁵

In these urban peripheries, a world population now lives in impoverished conditions of illegal and irregular residence around urban centers that benefit from their services and their poverty. Yet these conditions also generate a characteristic response: residents come to understand their basic needs not only in terms of their inhabiting and suffering the city but also in terms of building it—of building homes and neighborhoods; of making the city’s landscape, history, daily life, and politics into a place for themselves. The many meanings of this making often coalesce into a sense that they have a right to what they produce—a right, in sum, to the city itself.

Not all cities produce this kind of politicization, to be sure, and there are important differences to consider where they have. But the transformations of need into right that I describe occurred with such force in so many cities of the Global South that city-making itself became an animating strategic arena for the development of new and insurgent citizenships. As a result, national citizenships in many places are being reconfigured around the terms, aspirations, and conflicts of contemporary urban life. I want to emphasize, therefore, that although brutal political economies of labor, land, and law segregate the urban poor into peripheries and reduce them to a life of servility and violence, the very same structures of inequality incite these hinterland residents to demand a life worthy of citizens, articulated as a right to the city they are making. During the last half of the 20th century, these right-to-the city movements were overwhelmingly focused on problems of urban poverty and especially on residence. As a result, they were led by the subaltern classes of the city (new subjects of the political), with women often at the forefront because of their connection between city-making and the social reproduction of labor. Although joined in recent decades by more middle-class allies in universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and political parties, it was in this manner that the working-class experiences of the city became new and unprecedented *sources* for the transformations that resulted in urban planning (including policies, instruments, and norms) and in citizenship (including expectations, practices, rights, laws, and charters).⁶

In cities characterized by peripheral urbanization, processes of city-making and citizen-making have been coincident in time and space at unprecedented scale. The force of that intersection profoundly unsettled not only existing material conditions of urban life but also their political formulations in plans, constitutions, organizations, and movements. In effect, one of the key struggles during this period was to make this intersection as it was experienced among the urban poor the legitimate subject of politics. The solidarities of this political project transformed their lives from narratives of despair, incoherence, neglect, or sedition into sources of what is politically legitimate for the government to address in the distribution of resources. In effect, it forced entrenched regimes of rule to see the city-making of the laboring classes as fundamental to the commonwealth, no longer possible to neglect.

This was an extraordinary achievement. It established an insurgent agenda of city-making as the focus of urban politics through decades of hard, day-to-day struggles by residents, neighborhood associations, social movements, political organizations, civic councils, trade unions, and NGOs. In so doing, these transformations of the latter half of the 20th century established an agenda of opportunities and expectations about city life that were the preconditions of the 21st century urban rebellions. Nevertheless, an important question is whether the urban uprisings since 2000 continue to be framed by this production of the city by the laboring classes (an amalgam of fractions, to be sure), with its focus on residence more than labor, processes of peripheral urbanization, and citizenship, or whether politics has shifted to other agendas of city-making.

Who is the subject of the right to the city – humans or citizens?

Among those currently thinking about the city as a commonwealth, one must mention Hardt and Negri (2009) and Harvey (2012). As the latter (2012: 78) argues

What if we broaden that notion [of Marx's collective labor] to think, as Hardt and Negri suggest, that it is the metropolis that now constitutes a vast common produced by the collective labor expended on and in the city? The right to use that common must surely then be accorded to all those who have had a part in producing it. This is, of course, the basis for the claim to the right to the city on the part of the collective laborers who have made it.

While this understanding of a metropolitan commons is close to the one of city-making I have developed over the years,⁷ I also want to emphasize an important correlative difference: especially as it emerged in cities of the Global South, this insurgent *right* to the city confronted entrenched political regimes with alternative formulations of *citizenship* and not merely idiosyncratic or instrumental protest and violence. This formulation constitutes a new conceptual frame for right to the city, emerging from the South and differing from that originally articulated by Henri Lefebvre and developed by many others.⁸ In other words, the agents of this alternative to national belonging—the laboring classes of the urban peripheries—framed the right to the city not in terms of revolution, divine intervention, or even human needs. They conceived of it less than ever in terms of dependent client relations. Rather, for many of the urban poor—not all and not everywhere, to be sure—the right to the city became a specific kind of demand of a different sort: a claim of citizens, a citizen right, a right articulated within the framework of citizenship and its legal, ethical, and performative registers. Residents argued that those who make the city have a claim to it—what I call a contributor right.⁹ That claim constitutes their membership in the political community of the city and thus their urban citizenship.¹⁰

Many researchers and activists who, subsequent to Lefebvre's original formulation, have tried to understand the right to the city within a legal framework locate it within the paradigm of human rights. For example, Harvey (2008: 23) describes it as “one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.” He does not, however, develop this argument as a matter of paradigm. Indeed, this very lack of formulation is symptomatic of a noticeable trend in which many people, from United Nations and World Bank planners to academic researchers, call the right to the city a human right and take it for granted that the frame of human rights is an effective ground for it, either theoretically or empirically. Is it? The right to shelter and by extension housing may be a *human* right. I can accept that it is, though I am not sure it is the best (as in most effective) ground for the provision of housing either. But does the same logic apply to the city? Do we have a corresponding “human right to the suburb or the rural,” for example, that would help make sense of a “human right to the city”? In other words, who is the subject of the right to the city?

This is not the place to engage in a debate about the philosophical standing of human rights in relation to natural, positivist, and other kinds of rights. However, I suggest that a conception of a right grounded in an ontology of human nature as essential and normative is anthropologically suspect, to say the least. I imagine that what may motivate people to frame the right to the city as a human right is the problem of unauthorized urban immigrants; that is, the urgent need to include and to cover in its purview of protection precisely those who have no national rights and who are by definition excluded from them. Given the extraordinary numbers of such urban residents, is this not an effective strategic move to make, even if philosophically dubious?

I would argue that, in fact, it is neither effective nor the best option available if we focus the problem on the question of what would be the most effective political community to organize the heterogeneity of peoples that today live in most metropolitan regions, a heterogeneity in which many residents are not and will probably never be national citizens. At least one answer seems clear: given the multinationality of contemporary cities, it cannot be membership in the nation-state, not national citizenship. It could be a planetary organization of human rights. And indeed, many people conceive of the right to the city as a human right in such terms. But, as I have argued, that realization seems remote and, in any case, human rights are themselves fraught with conceptual, ontological, and ethical problems concerning that elusive substance called “human nature” that we need not solve—if indeed a solution is even possible—to ground the right to the city. Rather, I would ask whether it is not the city itself, organized by a residentially based citizenship, for which nation-state membership, national immigration status, and human nature are irrelevant. This is the kind of urban citizenship that people in Cape Town, São Paulo, Mumbai and, yes, radical places like San Francisco—I am thinking here of the Bay Area’s municipal identity cards, sanctuary cities movements, and access to health care based solely on urban residence—are inventing in response to neoliberal dispossession and inequality.

Thus, I think it much more effective politically, anthropologically, and philosophically to argue that the peripheral urbanization of the Global South in the last 50 years transformed Lefebvre’s conceptual frame of right to the city by articulating it as a right of urban citizenship, in which the primary ground of this citizen right is belonging to the city and not the nation-state. In articulating the right to the city as a right of citizenship, urban residents are also inventing an *urban* citizenship as distinct from the national—and indeed from some planetary notion of the human. This formulation of right to the city as a right of urban belonging is, in my view, a most compelling response to some of the most compelling political and social problems of our time.

The next question is what kind of citizenship is urban citizenship? We may understand citizenship generally as a norm of association defined by membership in a political community, in which the formal attribution of belonging or incorporation entails a substantive distribution of whatever prerogatives and obligations attach to membership (e.g., rights, duties, resources, and practices). In these

terms, what membership does urban citizenship constitute; what kind of belonging; what sort of substance? If these questions are fundamental for understanding any citizenship, they are especially so for the urban. This is because urban citizenship has formal standing almost nowhere in the contemporary world, having been systematically dismantled by the nation-state and its kind of citizenship over the last four hundred years.¹¹

Hence, we can only decide if we are indeed witnessing an emergence of urban citizenship in recent decades if we have conceptual criteria by which to identify it. Given the supremacy and antagonism of national citizenship, the urban is unlikely to receive formal legitimation from national sources of law and institutions of authority. Rather, it is far more likely to emerge from new sources of association that residents assemble from their shared production of the city in the activities of their lives and labors. In terms of assembly, the city constitutes a vast collective product that each resident has a part in making. This making is the basis of their claim to have a right to the city, a contributor right to what they have made, a claim that has nothing to do with formal or informal statuses of work, housing, or immigration. To the contrary, it only has to do with the active life of residents.¹² For that reason, residence is the condition that best enables this production of the city as a collective product. Thus, the associations that develop among city makers will be subversive of national prerogatives to the extent that urban residence is the principal qualification for membership and national affiliation is irrelevant (including its birthright criteria and fictions of naturalization). This mutual antagonism (indeed, subversion) between city and nation—or between principles of urban and national belonging, each of which entail corresponding solidarities—would seem to be a widespread factor in the recent emergence of urban citizenship from its long repression.

I consider urban citizenship, therefore, that form of association for which the making of the city is both the context and the substance of belonging, for which making is understood as the sum of activities of residents, and for which residence is the primary criterion of membership. Urban citizenship as a form of association is thus constituted when urban residence determines membership regardless of other identities; when the city is thereby the primary locus of political community; and when right-claims addressing the production of the city and related civic performances make up the agenda, mobilization, and passions of association. In these terms, urban citizenship does not necessarily supplant or negate national citizenship. But it does have two important and insurgent consequences. It often leads to a reformulation of national citizenship and it is available to non-nationals and to marginalized nationals.

21st-century insurgent cities

I have emphasized the emergence of contemporary urban citizenship because it provides the best frame with which to view the wave of metropolitan uprisings that has shaken the world in the last 20 years. The pace of this revolt has indeed

quicken in the second decade of the century as uprisings spread through cities in Europe, North Africa, Asia, and the Americas. There are obvious variations. Some uprisings are direct responses to the financial meltdown of 2008 (Greece, Iceland, United States, Spain); some focus especially on questions of democracy (Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Hong Kong); still others on the cost of living, education, and labor (Chile, Brazil, France). However, in all cases these concerns intersect, sharing a number of fundamental features: intense occupations of urban space, rejection of representative politics, experiments with alternative forms of democracy, mobilizations against the erosion of common resources and services of urban life, resistance to eviction and gentrification, resistance to police violence, use of new social media, and the emergence of new public spheres of participation and sociality. As space precludes a detailed treatment of cases, I direct readers to the references cited in the third endnote to see how each of these features developed in particular contexts.

What is strikingly common in these cases is that residents came together around a broadly mobilized sense that the conditions and determinations of urban life have failed them, and around a corresponding demand for a different kind of city, one that is free and just. In Istanbul, for example, protests began in May 2013 in Taksim Square and the adjacent Gezi Park over a redevelopment plan that would eliminate these public spaces. They contested the national government's imposition of the plan without public participation to the benefit of "a coalition of urban developers, credit institutions, local and central state actors *and* the political and economically stronger inhabitants of these areas, whose interests lie in the institutionalization of a neo-liberal urban regime."¹³ The proposed redevelopment motivated thousands of people to camp in the park, claiming the right to occupy as a means to defend the city, move about it freely, and manage its infrastructure and spaces of public life against developer predations and autocratic government planning.¹⁴ In the park camp, people organized food distribution, sanitation, alternative media, a medical center, and a library, among other social services, demonstrating their capacity to constitute themselves socially from their own resources. After brutal police repression of the camp, supporting protests spread across Turkey as tens of thousands of people took to the streets and occupied squares in more than 70 cities. They protested a wide range of issues, including lack of public consultation in urban redevelopment; sale of public spaces to private developers; lack of urban services; police violence; corruption and authoritarianism; and restrictions on freedom of assembly.

The initial spark for the massive mobilizations in Brazilian cities in June 2013 was also about daily urban life: a planned twenty-cent fare increase for public buses. But by mid-June millions of Brazilians were marching to express their revulsion at many conditions of urban life, announcing a hive of issues on the posters they carried: "urban mobility is a right; a teacher is worth more than [soccer star] Neymar; if there is money for the World Cup, there is money for health and education; housing is a right—stop evictions; the vandals are the politicians; freedom of expression; say no to the 'gay cure'; justice delayed is justice

denied; stop police violence”; and so on and on; transportation, infrastructure, health, education, housing, women-gay-indigenous-black-citizen rights, corruption, political reform (parties, elections, congress), justice, security, environment, specific legislation, energy (nuclear, hydro, oil), and violence.

Across mobilizations, in city after city, proclaimed in assemblies and displayed on posters, people understood the failure of urban conditions in terms of rights. They shared the sense that they had a right to better conditions of life which had not been realized; a right to the city they had made by living in it that should be worthy of their efforts; a right that had been violated. Hence, protestors of all kinds talked about rights of all kinds. This rights-talk amounted, moreover, to something greater than a list of individual demands, as indicated by a poster at a street demonstration in mid-June 2013 in São Paulo that I saw. It offered a more general assessment amid a sea of specific demands: “The class today is here. The subject? Citizenship.” This poster speaks to the discovery by a new generation of Brazilians of the city as the site of insurgence (the “here”) and of the life of its streets as the agenda of democratic citizenship (“the class”).

Although agonism certainly characterized the uprisings, so did remarkable solidarities among often-antagonistic groups. After the police brutally repressed the initial group of mostly middle-class protestors in Taksim Square, a cross-section of Turkish society of quite mixed class composition mobilized against police violence and in support of the right to protest. In my survey of the online publications, I have found mention of the following kinds of participants: Taksim Solidarity Movement members, environmentalists, Socialists, Communists, Anarchists, Social Democrats, Kemalists, feminists, LGBT activists, anti-capitalist Muslims, nationalists, liberals, libertarians, soccer-team supporter clubs, labor unions, lawyers, engineers, architects, doctors, nurses, other medical workers, Alevis (heterodox Muslim Shi’as), Kurds, atheists, and grandmothers. Participants described new kinds of cross-sectional dialogues that emerged during the uprisings as one of the main achievements. Thus a journalist-participant wrote that “Gezi brought down the walls between conservative Muslims and secularists, nationalist Turks and Kurds, Alevis and Sunnis, men and women. Everybody started talking.” A feminist activist said, “We also realized that conservative women and women wearing headscarves share many of our problems: domestic violence, equal pay, access to abortion. This created much wider solidarity networks between women.”¹⁵

My own sense of Brazil’s mobilizations is that residents of the lower-class peripheries had a strong and at times specifically provocative presence in the demonstrations, although I cannot put numbers to class participation and though mainstream media initially described them as overwhelmingly middle class. This assessment is based on my work in Rio de Janeiro, on the research of Teresa Caldeira in São Paulo,¹⁶ and on three sets of images of class confrontation that appeared repeatedly in the protests and in photographs, videos, and posts about them. In the first set, a person (deemed middle class by formulaic associations of dress and physiognomy) carries a poster saying “Brazil has awoken.”

Juxtaposed to it is an image of another person who carries a sign that refutes this claim by asserting “You woke up now. The periphery was never asleep.”¹⁷ The second set presents the banner “It’s not about 20 cents, it’s about rights.” Juxtaposed to it is the sign, “It’s the fucking 20 cents damn it” (*É os 20 centavos pôrra*), carried aloft by an enraged (often brown) body. The third set of images compares exceptional police violence against middle-class demonstrators—the use of pepper spray and rubber bullets—and everyday police violence in the peripheries: “Why do rubber bullets against white skin outrage more than real bullets that kill black people every day.”

These images all point to the segregation between “center and periphery” (shifting and complex terms, to be sure) in urban Brazil that perdures in terms not only of life chances and basic services but also of knowledge about them. The upper classes in the center do not know what goes on in the peripheries that “have not been sleeping.” They do not know its cultural production (except when imposed or commercialized), experience its intense sociality, suffer its violence, endure its infrastructure, or understand its life conditions. The lower-class demonstrators were telling the upper-class demonstrators as much in these dueling images of protest.

So why should they share demands? Why should residents of the peripheries who suffer the absurdities of public transportation every day be joined in demanding “zero fare” by middle-class residents who use cars? Perhaps a plausible explanation lies in the everyday bodily experience of the city itself: given the low quality of urban life in Brazil (which looked especially bad in light of gigantic expenditures on sport stadiums for the 2014 World Cup), different classes of people suffer the city’s injuries and indignities in their own ways, but that amounts to a discontent that is strongly shared. Commuting to work, periphery residents spend a shocking average of almost three hours a day packed like cattle in buses, vans, and trains that are always late because of snarled traffic. But residents who commute in cars are also stuck in traffic for hours. All are immobilized. With an average increase of 78% in the urban fleet of cars between 2001 and 2011 in Brazilian metropolitan regions—the result of the Partido dos Trabalhadores’ (PT) emphasis on automobile production and consumption over investment in public transportation—city arteries are now clogged. Especially for young people of all classes, mobility has become not only a style of life, an aspiration, but also a right. The Free Fare Movement (Movimento Passe Livre, or MPL) understands this urban dilemma and states it clearly in one of its principal slogans: “A city only exists for those who move around it.” Hence, “jump the turnstile” and “zero fare” are compelling for all demonstrators.

The Brazilian middle classes generally turn a blind eye to police violence in the peripheries. But when the police gassed, sprayed, and beat their own in the first June demonstrations, they poured into the streets to protest. All are victims. Given the wealth of Brazil, public education and health care are pathetically underfunded, and the upper classes avoid them like the plague. But private education and health care now cost a fortune. All but the wealthiest are squeezed. All pay the price of the unrelenting corruption scandals that corrode the political system. Politicians of all parties thumb their noses at the public because they have

effectively achieved impunity in a justice system that is obviously unjust. Moreover, while the national PT government focused on salary improvements and increased consumption as proof that Brazil had joined the league of middle-class nations and that periphery residents had become “the new middle class,” Brazilians had their experiences of the city to show them that the actual quality of basic conditions did not correspond to the claims. In effect, the protests refuted this model of social development.

In their demands for a just city, the June protests indicated the development, after a decade of patience with PT national government, of new and different forms of the insurgent urban citizenship movements that transformed Brazil from the 1970s to the early 2000s.¹⁸ Indeed, just three years later, these movements erupted again, incorporating some of the same base but divided into bitterly opposing factions, one demanding the ouster of President Dilma Rousseff and the other defending her from it. Without doubt, the pro-impeachment mobilizations provided legitimacy to the “congressional coup” that eventually impeached Rousseff and terminated the PT government.¹⁹

The uprisings in Brazil and Turkey exemplify the emergence of an urban politics for a new generation of residents in cities worldwide. A distinctive aspect is that they offset major mobilizations against an opponent (such as state planning, housing evictions, representative government, or capitalism) with the enactment of an alternative. Some researchers have described this kind of enacting as a “prefiguration” of desired elements of a new social order (e.g., Graeber, 2002), such that participants structure their occupations in terms of the very attributes they want the world to become. Thus, as in Istanbul, Oakland, and Madrid, the rejection of representative democracy mobilizes a politics of direct democracy to govern encampments through general assemblies, horizontal networks, and working groups that focus on the development both of strategies of contestation and of proposals for citizen rights and just practices. Protestors do not only denounce the failures of vertical channels of communication with elected politicians. They also demonstrate what a different form of politics could be by creating new forms of horizontal communication via assembly and social media that aim to be leaderless, open, participatory, and deliberative.

Similarly, unemployment, eviction, and the generalized “financialization of everything” are challenged by a critique of neoliberalism and proposals for a new economy, decommodification, and use of resources. The failures of urban planning and the crimes of government corruption are rebutted by the encampments themselves, which occupy the city with an instance of a new society. The erosions of state services in health, education, and security are countered not only by massive demonstrations but also by effectively run social services in the camps themselves. The production of new media replaces outmoded, monopolized, or censored existing mass media. All these alternative political processes become new sources for a citizenship germinated outside the purview of the state.²⁰

Another distinctive attribute is that the uprisings articulate their mobilization through the medium of Internet-based social media. This feature makes them less

specifically place-based than earlier urban citizenship movements. That is, they may refer to place, but that place is the city as a whole and generally not specific neighborhoods or territories in the terms of which previous generations of insurgent urban citizens often organized. Nevertheless, the digital mobilization of collective identities (*coletivos*, as Brazilians call them) that today organize youth around thematic issues such as black, feminist, gay, and Asian identities, poetry, graffiti, justice, and environment—more than class itself—refuel the stock of 20th-century citizenship movements with new political resources. Such digitally expressed identitarian politics is new as a mass phenomenon and it emphasizes horizontal and leaderless association into a body politic through the Internet. Via social media, the collectives gain a sense of commonwealth in the construction of identity, and individuals affiliated with them become energized with a sense of greater legitimation as protestors.

When the sparks of autocratic redevelopment, eviction, fare increases, and police violence lit up the Internet, the ignition expanded the concepts of equality and right to the city dramatically by catalyzing new digital publics in a common cause. In this manner, a new generation of habitual Internet denizens in the most varied locations around the world is innovating its forms of *political expression* through the Internet, social media, and cell phones; through online forums and digitally assembled face-to-face assemblies, workshops, marches, and new manners of deliberation; all of which directly nourish a new cultural production. Assemblies, marches, and multitudes do not require digital media. But social apps and digitalization contribute a new dimension to their democratic organization, namely, that of the promise if not yet the realization of new forms of direct democracy as a means to democratize democracy itself. As such, they consolidate a new and now proven resource of political organization capable of both expressing and producing vast horizontal solidarities.²¹

Protest or insurgence?

Occupy Wall Street, 15M Madrid, Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, São Paulo, Hong Kong, Nuit Debout Paris all indicate both that the new metropolitan rebellions eventually fade as street activity and that much remains to re-ignite another day. Both outcomes derive from the same problem: Are they more protest or insurgent movements? I am considering the former as an objection to current conditions framed by requests for change made to existing authorities. To the extent that the recent uprisings are mostly of this sort, as in Brazil, they suffer a debilitating contradiction because they use a language of rights, policy, welfare, development, citizenship, and state that they nevertheless reject. Thus they demand that the political system produces change but both reject existing politics and seem incapable of inventing new political institutions beyond the mold of existing politics. Without the latter, they are bound to disappear as petition-movements of little societal consequence.

By insurgent movements, I mean those that object to current conditions by articulating alternative proposals that arise from their own self-empowered assembling of citizens who investigate, decide, and act and who storm state authorities with these alternatives. Their demands are not fundamentally for the state to extend existing rights and resources. Rather, they demand that the state accept the legitimacy of proposals developed from the resources of participants' own life struggles in producing the city, articulated in their own political assembly, and proposed for a different city/society. They are not asking to participate in a merely consultative process but demanding a deliberative one where they make decisions that are binding for government. This alternative political process of direct democracy has the capacity to generate new associational and organizational forms that substantiate an urban citizenship that is, perforce, subversive of existing institutions. In effect, this is the capacity to produce new institutions and processes that democratize a de-democratized democracy. Taking over and occupying the spaces of the city enacts the possession of them as a collective product and therefore embodies the claim to the city as a commonwealth. In this sense, occupying is an instantiation of the general condition of an insurgent urban citizenship.

The new uprisings are a difficult mix of both protest and insurgence thus conceived. In that amalgam, they are also like earlier insurgent citizen movements. Yet, in many cases, the subversive institutions of earlier movements that were so productive for democracy worldwide between 1970 and 2000 had little presence in the new revolts. In Brazil, for example, the comparison is discouraging. The participatory innovations of the late 1980s and 1990s—namely, participatory budgeting, participatory urban planning, and municipal councils in health, education, and housing²²—had no role in the June demonstrations. One could argue that their political efficacy got eviscerated because they were absorbed into the national PT machine and remained only consultative. Thus nationalized and without deliberative powers, they lost their place-based urgency and insurgency to address substantive local issues. Similarly, the neighborhood associations and forums of the urban peripheries—the great participatory innovations of the 1970s and 1980s—also had little organized presence in the protests, even though many remain effective locally. Thus, in comparison, the insurgent political landscape of the new century in Brazil is sparse. Indeed, political elites were able to manipulate the massive 2016 demonstrations over the president's impeachment to their own ends with regressive results for Brazilian democracy.

Without doubt, sustained political innovation is difficult under any condition. Moreover, when promising, it is also deeply threatening. Thus, the fruits of the urban revolts in Istanbul and Cairo were murderously repressed. In Ljubljana (Slovenia), Paris, Athens, and other European cities, they now appear thwarted by rising anti-immigrant and nationalist right-wing mobilizations. However, in many Spanish cities, we find new kinds of local participatory institutions in health care, political initiative, and planning as a direct result of Indignado frameworks, as well as locally initiated nuclei of the citizen movement Podemos (Iglesias, 2015). In the Bay Area cities of San Francisco, alternative formulations of political

community have both contributed to and developed from Occupy movements since 2008. These counter-formulations to the prerogatives of national and state citizenships have emerged as local communities defy the nationally defined exclusions of many of their residents, both non-nationals (often unauthorized immigrants) and marginal nationals. As a result, these alternatives tend to coalesce around local initiatives that ignite conflicts between nation, state, and city, such as municipal identity cards, sanctuary city policies, participatory budgeting, local voting rights for non-nationals, urban squatting, access to health care, and control of subsoil resources. Cities such as Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco are creating local citizenships based on residence as sufficient qualification for the exercise of rights to urban resources and political association, regardless of national identity and immigration status.

A new rhetoric of political life

What leads some urban uprisings to produce new and insurgent forms of politics while others do not? Why do some experiment with new forms of direct democracy through innovations of assembly and decision-making while others remain in mere protest? Though there are conjunctural specificities in each case, there is little doubt that the insurgent politics of direct democracy depends, minimally, on the realization of two processes. The first is one of commoning, as I have defined it throughout this essay, namely, as the development not only of a sense among people that they are constructing a realm of acting together—call it solidarity—out of their common activities, but also of a sense that they have contributor rights to the commons thus created. This realm may be materialized as a space (e.g., the city square), but it is fundamentally about the common activities that produce it. The second is the process through which contributor rights are articulated and exercised. What makes this process one of direct democracy is that its politics is based on an active public debate over important issues of the commons—over, for example, significant alternatives for and distributions of rights to its use—and that this debate *precedes* binding and not merely consultative decision-making by those affected by the issues.²³ These processes constitute an insurgent politics of citizenship when the sense of commoning and the dispositions of direct democracy challenge the entrenched powers of other forms of rule, including representative democracy.

Many kinds of activities may be important in this construction of an insurgent politics.²⁴ In this essay, I have argued that the city offers the most salient contemporary context and text for its development. I have not argued that the nation-state is insignificant in these matters. I have rather focused on what an urban citizenship articulates that the national does not; what the urban promotes that the national inhibits; and who the city includes that the state excludes. These urban activities may encompass building houses and neighborhood gardens, resisting eviction and securing land tenure, obtaining infrastructural services, recycling trash, constructing ethnic identities, raising children, and organizing an assembly. What matters is not the specifics of the activity but the active sense of a common project in producing

it in which participants have controlling shares, rather than a sense of public investment, passive entitlement, or private achievement. What turns an urban commoning into one of direct democracy is a process of communication, deliberation, and articulation of these shares through specific methods of public debate, access to information, proposal development, and decision-making. Indeed, many of the recent metropolitan rebellions have tried explicitly to elaborate such methods in their assemblies and that is precisely one of their distinctive experimental features.²⁵

Let me describe these methods of mobilization and assembly as a rhetoric of political life. By rhetoric, I refer to the classic Athenian sense of the means to turn ordinary citizens (*idiōtai*) into public and political ones—an “idiot” being someone who is absorbed in private life in contrast to the citizen who finds self-fulfillment in the commons of the city.²⁶ Athenians thought of political rhetoric as a specific type of communication, distinguishing the speech and communicative conditions of deliberative decision-making from those of forensic and epideictic rhetoric, as Aristotle explains in Book 3 of his *Rhetoric*. Certainly, one of the distinctive innovations of the recent metropolitan rebellions is the experimental use of digital information and communication technologies *in combination with* face-to-face assemblies. Although assessing these technological experiments demands an analysis that is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to register their ambition so that we have an appreciation of what they proposed as the challenges for a new politics—not a post politics—after the current wave of urban rebellions disappears.

At stake in aiming to generate new practices of convocation, assembly, and decision-making is the development of new methods to common the city, that is, to produce a new mode of peer-to-peer communication about what is common, and by that means commoned, without recourse to centralization. The experimental proposition is to create new and transversal rhetorics of urban political life with the potential to distribute direct democratic engagement at unprecedented scale. If new urban assemblies *could* leverage the Internet to reach massive numbers of residents with the means to co-develop proposals, deliberate on alternatives, and make binding decisions, they would offer real possibilities for overcoming supposed constraints on the exercise of direct democracy beyond very small political units. Thus far, this ambition has not been realized. But with some success and some failure, the experiments have indeed challenged received wisdom about classic democratic problems of scale, belonging, motivation, information, argument, speech, and audibility, and therefore may point to an emerging new politics of urban citizenship.

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Notes

1. See, among others, Rancière (1999) (“consensus democracy,” “postdemocracy”) and Swyngedouw (2009).
2. Each component of this claim has its theoretical ground, one in a Lefebvrian argument about the right to what one makes and the other in an Arendtian–Aristotelian argument about acting together. But a discussion of their inter-relation must await another occasion.
3. Sources on the uprisings include Balibar (2007), Caldeira (2013), Castells (2012), Charnock et al. (2012), Holston (2014), Hughes (2011), Lazar (2008), Panayotakis (2009), Razsa and Kurnik (2012), Schneider Mansilla and Conti (2003), Taylor et al. (2011), El-Kazaz (2013), and Tuğal (2013a, 2013b).
4. Violence precludes the space in between and thus constitutes an “uncommoning.” In this pragmatic analysis, if politics presupposes commoning, violence precludes politics. There are a number of contemporary urban processes in addition to violence that constitute or contribute to an uncommoning, such as gentrification, segregation, and racism. Unfortunately, I must leave a consideration of uncommoning to another occasion.
5. See Holston (2001) for a discussion of this salience and also Caldeira (2016).
6. See Caldeira and Holston (2005) for a study of planning transformations in Brazil.
7. For example, see Holston (1991) for a study of the “autoconstruction” of the Brazilian urban peripheries and its political and social consequences.
8. See Lefebvre (1996[1968]) for his formulation of right to the city. Subsequent followers and interpreters are too many and well known to enumerate here, but see Purcell (2003) for a useful discussion. Purcell develops a notion ~~develops a notion~~ of citizenship related to right to the city (in his case, “the global city”) that is different from but related to my own. I have developed the “southern argument” in Holston (2008), namely, that the right to the city developed differently in the Global South than Lefebvre imagined by becoming the basis of an urban citizenship that he also never conceptualized within new legal or citizenship frameworks – though he hinted at this development in his argument that the right to the city fundamentally entails the right to participation and the right to appropriation based on inhabitation.
9. I discuss the concept of “contributor right” in Holston (2008), especially pp. 260–263.
10. More recently, middle and elite classes have been using right-to-the-city arguments to advance their claims to urban space. They pursue demands, for example, for a “healthy city” as a strategy to remove squatters, as new research in India, Brazil, and South Africa shows. See, for example, Baviskar (2003) on “bourgeois environmentalism” and essays in Desai and Sanyal (2012).
11. See Spruyt (1994) for a historical discussion of competing sovereignties.
12. I am reminded here of Arendt’s (1958: 7) use of the term *vita activa* “to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action” that together generate the “human condition.” Interestingly, she does not include language in this first order of characteristics but, adapting Aristotle’s consideration of *lexis* (speech), considers it essential to the activity of action out of which rises the realm of political life.
13. Kuyucu and Ünsal (2010: 1479) identify such large-scale and state-led urban transformation projects as the main mechanisms of a new neoliberal urban planning, demonstrating that they “predominantly aim at physical and demographic upgrading . . . rather than improving the living conditions of existing inhabitants, thus instigating a process of property transfer and displacement.”

14. My sources for this discussion come mainly from online publications and blogs in *Jadaliyya*, at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com>. For example, see El-Kazaz (2013) (especially about the importance of the park itself) and Tuğal (2013a, 2013b).
15. Cited in *The Guardian's* online edition, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey>.
16. See her essay at: <http://kafila.org/2013/07/05/sao-paulo-the-city-and-its-protests-teresa-caldeira/>.
17. I thank Teresa Caldeira for pointing out this juxtaposition to me; see Caldeira (2013).
18. See Holston (2008) for a study of these movements.
19. Nevertheless, I would not characterize the pro-/anti-impeachment movements of 2016 as urban rebellions stemming from the insurgent communing of 2013. They were national protests fueled by national political parties, offering little if any alternative political process, and overwhelmingly concentrated on monovocal issues (basically, impeachment). See below for the difference between insurgence and protest.
20. The camps themselves may be mostly for the young, between the ages of 20 and 30; but the ideas, organizations, alternatives, and critiques that structure them inspire much broader support.
21. An assessment of social media and related digital communication technologies as a new means to common the city requires an extensive discussion that is, regrettably, not possible here because of space limitations. I refer the reader to Juris (2012) for an analysis of the “aggregation logics” of social media during Occupy that produced a “viral circulation of protest.” I also refer to Ochigame and Holston (2016) for a critical assessment of information control on social media through algorithmic filtering and its negative consequences for democratic articulation. Different views may be found, for example, in Morozov (2011) and Shirky (2008).
22. See Abers (2000), Baiocchi et al. (2011), and Wampler and Avritzer (2005), among others. On a new judicialization of participation, see Caldeira and Holston (2015).
23. For this understanding of direct democracy, I am indebted to the scholars of ancient Athens, particularly Ober (1989) and Hansen (1999).
24. For a related discussion of “insurrection as the active modality of citizenship,” though not one focused on the city, see also Balibar (2015).
25. In these experiments, they try to move beyond the supposed limitations of direct democracy for mass society. For an articulation of these limitations, see Buchanan and Tullock (1962). For a discussion of the “assembly movement” (15M) in the neighborhoods of Madrid, see Corsín Jiménez and Estalella (2014). They analyze its elaboration of a “Methodology for Assemblies” that proposes not only a rhetoric and process but also a “hardware” of materials for assembly-making and direct democracy.
26. Ober (1989: 111) writes that “all Athenian citizens who were not serving in magistracies or on juries were *idiōtai*.”

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