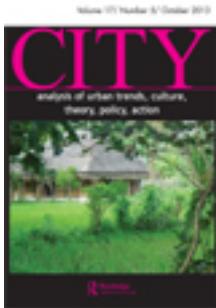


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# In the middle of a revolution ... so where the hell is Stringer Bell?

Mark Davidson

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*According to Paul Mason's account of 2011, we are in the middle of a revolution; a moment of social upheaval that must be measured against 1848, 1917 and 1968. This article assesses Mason's eloquent description of capitalist crisis by distinguishing between three different parts of it: ideological failure, politico-ideological refusal and social change. Slavoj Žižek's theories of ideology and recent commentary on 2011's revolutionary events are drawn upon to develop three sequential arguments relating to these three moments of crisis. First the paper argues that an obvious ideological failure (of neoliberalism) does not guarantee any kind of ideological rejection, by either political left or right. By extension, we must reassess the political and/or ideological refusal that characterizes many of the protest movements that were ignited by the recent economic crisis. Crucially though, this valuing of politico-ideological refusal cannot come at the expense of normative action. The paper concludes by exploring Žižek's tripartite revolutionary persona – Jack Bauer, Homer Simpson and Stringer Bell. Out of these three characters, Stringer Bell is identified as a key figure of inspiration for critical urbanists. A purveyor of illegitimate goods whose very existence relies on his non-incorporation of the 'legitimate' world of corrupt capitalism can provide a template for those who argue for another type of city.*

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**Key words:** revolution, capitalism, Paul Mason, Slavoj Žižek, ideology, urban

Paul Mason's (2012, 2013) account of the momentous events of 2011, *Why It's (Still) Kicking Off Everywhere*, offers a concise synopsis of causation:

'We're in the middle of a revolution caused by the near collapse of free-market capitalism combined with an upswing in technical innovation, a surge in the desire for individual freedom and a change in human consciousness about what freedom means.' (3)

By Mason's reckoning, we are therefore in the *middle* of a revolutionary period. Such a diagnosis tells us that something *has come to an end*. Mason, borrowing from Mark

Fisher (2009), identifies this endpoint as the death of 'capitalist realism': 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher 2009 quoted in Mason 2012, 30). A once presumed to be stable ideological frame has suddenly collapsed and, consequently, Mason observes we are now enabled to question existing social relations and think about the possibility of new social worlds.

Despite a currently uneven global geography of protest, this ideological shift remains evident. Even in the heartlands of

neoliberalism, present-day discussions of tax havens, corporate tax payments and corrupt global elites demonstrate a stark contrast to the almost unquestioned celebration of over-accumulated wealth that preceded the 2007–2008 financial crisis. The existing ‘system’ is indeed thought to be defunct along many parts of the political spectrum. However, as Slavoj Žižek ([1989] 2009, 2012) suggests, ideological crisis does not necessarily mean ideological change. Indeed, ideology might well be the archetype to demonstrate the frightening fact that we live in un-enlightened times. That is to say, it is clear that today (ideological) failures do not necessarily impel us to produce (ideological) solutions. It is in the realm of ideology that the modernist philosophical presumption that social antagonisms are resolved by enlightened human action so often fails to hold.

In this paper, I explore this ideological problematic through a contrasting of Mason’s account of the ongoing revolution with Slavoj Žižek’s (2012) *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. In large part these two accounts are complementary: both agree that economic breakdown and ideological crisis have generated a new round of revolutionary movements. Both see the need for systemic change. Yet the two accounts employ very different methods: Mason the first-hand, globetrotting journalist and Žižek the arm’s-length philosophical speculator. This epistemological difference results in their discussions having very different points of emphasis. My goal is to use Žižek’s account of 2011–12 to bring an extended consideration of ideology to Mason’s first-hand journalistic account of the revolutionary movement. My method is to examine three parts of this movement: ideological failure, politico-ideological refusal and social change. The latter has, in most places at least, yet to become manifest. Indeed, it is actively being fought against by various *ancien régimes* in most places. However, I want to place emphasis on this latter part of the revolutionary sequence since both Mason and Žižek’s accounts, albeit in

different ways, signal to the important role that the city, and by extension urbanists, might play in this process. Here I will argue that Žižek’s induction of *The Wire*’s Stringer Bell into his tri-partite revolutionary persona is politically productive in the context of Mason’s passing comments on the urban roots of revolution.

### The end of capitalism as we know it!

For leftist readers, the most seductive part of Paul Mason’s globetrotting account of 2011 will be the way in which he manages to place each of his destinations within an overarching revolutionary narrative. It is clear from the start of Mason’s account that he sees today’s varied and dispersed revolutions as a collection of events, brought together through their varying incorporation into globalized capitalism. The sum of today’s revolutions therefore amounts to a global crisis of capitalism. As stated, Mason uses Mark Fisher’s (2009) concept of ‘capitalist realism’ to describe what preceded this crisis:

‘the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it ... a pervasive atmosphere conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining action’. (Fisher 2009; cited in Mason 2012, 30)

The blatant failure of Western capitalism and related protest movements that followed made redundant this reality. No longer does it appear that capitalism, given some technocratic tampering, has all the answers. The Fukuyama-ist dream of a stable capitalist, democratic world melted away throughout 2011 as the system’s inherent tendency towards crisis, inequality and corruption became all too apparent. As Mason notes, crisis shattered this fatalistic vision of the

future, one that was, up until very recently, held by most on the left and right (30).

In earlier work, Mason (2009) described this bleak apolitical stalemate as resulting from deep psychological complacency. ‘Capitalist realism’ was, he argued, sustained by the system’s apparent economic progress and the related absence of political opportunities born out of discontent and/or crisis. Therefore, when economic progress (and its trickle down, fictitious capital-driven, developmental promises and subprime-Lehman foundations) broke down, it was impossible to maintain this worldview. Of course, it was not long until considerable efforts were being expended to reconstruct this worldview. In the political–economic sphere these efforts manifest in continual ‘quantitative easing’ (aka currency devaluations) and stimulus programs—even in ‘austerity UK’—to magic up a return to growth. Ideological propaganda is also being widely and rapidly circulated, in forms such as TED Talks (see Bono’s recent claim that poverty will be eradicated by 2050) and World Development Goals that continue to project the current situation as a blip in capitalism’s inevitably endless growth (see Harvey 2013). As Mason convincingly argues, simple economic facts tell us these efforts are unlikely to result in any widespread return to capitalist realism.

Throughout his book, Mason argues that the deep-rooted crisis of the global economy will continue to drive protest movements, alongside complementing political and social oppressions. The economic diagnosis is bleak: trade wars, devaluations, debt defaults and generational declines in wealth. To some extent, all of this seems un-contentious. A capitalist economy without growth is not a capitalist economy and an oppressed, exploited mass of workers are highly unlikely to remain devoid of class consciousness without the promise of growth and/or payoffs from the welfare state. As a result of these structural economic problems, we therefore face a long period of ideological crisis. Yet it is necessary to develop the straightforward

relationship Mason sees between economic crisis and ideological crisis. In short, we cannot presume that ideological change will simply result from the historic crisis of over-accumulation that the 99% are currently experiencing.

Mason’s account of today’s revolutionary movement decries the ‘absence of a coherent left’ (187) and the seeming inability of protesters to translate their programs into political agendas. The revolution, he claims, has largely failed to break out of its political stage. Protesters have remained protesters, failing to become normative political actors. However, what if this criticism only partly explains the current deadlocked situation? Is the rejection of a defunct ideological frame and the creation of a new ideological frame simply driven by economically motivated political action? Žižek’s (2012) account of the current revolutionary period suggests not:

‘Today, we are bombarded with a multitude of attempts to humanize capitalism, from eco-capitalism to Basic Income capitalism. The reasoning behind these attempts goes as follows: Historical experience has demonstrated that capitalism is by far the best way to generate wealth; at the same time, it must be admitted that left to itself the process of capitalist reproduction entails exploitation, the destruction of natural resources, mass suffering, injustice, wars etcetera. Our aim should thus be to maintain the basic capitalist matrix of profit-orientated reproduction, but to steer and regulate it so that it serves the larger goals of global welfare and justice.’ (16)

To be sure, there are many members of today’s various protest movements who would not fit this description. However, Žižek’s synopsis does capture the general reformist agendas that various governance institutions have undertaken post-crisis. Of course, to some extent this reformism can be viewed as a simple act of class power. The apt example being the Gulf States, where dominant class interests have attempted to buy off protesters and the oppressed with huge welfare spending and a limited expansion of civil liberties.

However, Žižek's reading of ideology stresses the crucial point that any ideological system operates to maintain the adherence of its subjects.

For Žižek ([1989] 2009, 45) all humans operate within an ideology:

'Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our "reality" itself: an "illusion" which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real impossible kernel . . . The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.'

Ideology is our entry point into knowing the world around us. It is not something that 'bends' our reality; something that stops us seeing how it really is. On the contrary, it is this bending of reality (i.e. the crude material world around us) that brings us into a world of speaking beings: 'His content, "what he is", would be determined by an exterior signifying network offering him the points of symbolic identification, conferring on him certain symbolic mandates' (Žižek [1989] 2009, 46). By identifying with our symbolic (i.e. ideological) world, we consequently develop an attachment to it. Even if, crucially, that attachment is a negative one. For example, we develop our own understanding of the place we occupy within the capitalist world (e.g. critical, radical, liberal, progressive, etc.) and this functions to root us as subjects.

In the realm of politico-economic critique, Žižek claims this being-within-ideology can produce an attachment to the subject's social world, even if the subject knows this world is dysfunctional, cruel, unjust, etc. Revolutionizing the social world therefore imposes a traumatic process on any subject. One can no longer be certain of one's being (i.e. social position, identity, etc.) within a new symbolic order. A consequence of this ideological attachment regarding political change

is that, for Žižek, we often find calls for reformism within what would otherwise be revolutionary movements. The examples he commonly uses are 'socialism with a human face' (e.g. pre-1989 reformism in Eastern Europe) and 'capitalism with a human face' (e.g. today's anti-poverty movement). Marx's revolutionary sequence must therefore be complicated by the ideological dimension. Quite simply, we cannot overlook the ways in which subjects act to resist revolutionary transformations, even if they themselves support them. This process of symbolic reincorporation has, of course, taken place more frequently as capitalism's necessity to revolutionize has accelerated.

In many places, the immediate upsurge of protest that followed the 2007 financial crisis has faded. An emergent geography of austerity reforms, institutional bickering, revanchism and business-as-usual is quickly becoming normalized. And yet, as Mason makes clear, it is far from clear that the economic crisis has been resolved. However, Mason's reading of this crisis remains mixed. Whereas he sees both an end to 'capitalist realism' and an economic crisis unraveling the world economy, he is less clear on the necessary resolutions. Indeed, in one telling paragraph, Mason indulges in a moment of technological utopianism to envision a reformed version of today's capitalism. Technology, at least tentatively, is offered as a means to resolve capitalism's antagonisms:

'The technological and inter-personal revolutions of the early twenty-first century pose precisely this question. Namely, is it now possible to conceive of living this "emancipated" life as a fully connected "species-being" on the terrain of capitalism itself—indeed on the terrain of a highly marketized form of capitalism, albeit in conflict with it? I don't know the answer, but merely to pose the question is exhilarating.' (Mason 2012, 143)

In response to Mason's question, it might well be exhilarating to ask this question, but it is also highly problematic. If we are

indeed witnessing a structural crisis of capitalism, should we not focus our attention on the politico-economic structures that generate it? If we do this, it remains very difficult to foresee the ways in which technology might resolve the economic, social and environmental problems that plague the planet. To be sure, technological advances may indeed ease and/or resolve some of these tensions, but the elevation of technology to resolver of today's global economic and political problems seems to indulge in a type of speculation that can leave today's failing 'capitalist realism' on life support (Merrifield 2011).

Perhaps the reason for Mason's indulgence here relates to the difficulties we face when imagining another type of society, one where our symbolic identifications are radically transformed, presenting ourselves as very different subjects? To maintain an identification with today's capitalist ideology therefore removes such traumatic questions. Reform from within—however much we know this is unlikely to remove capitalism's core antagonisms—remains the 'safe' option for most of those in the Global North. However, this is becoming a problematic position for both the revolutionary and pragmatist. Despite a dampening of protest, the challenges of a failing economy—not to mention environmental degradation—must push us to maintain traumatic revolutionary possibilities. Mason himself criticizes today's protest movements for their being stuck in the political moment, for their refusing to engage in the normative political project. Yet he, at times, falls into a similar trap, being reluctant to dispose of today's capitalist world.

### Just saying no!

To the simple narrative of economic crisis causing protest movements, we should therefore add the ideological dimension. Crucially, we need to consider how we go about the ideological disassociation required to enact radical social change. Simply put,

we cannot assume that economic calamity will produce social change. Žižek argues that the first step in recognizing the ideological dimension of today's revolution is to re-evaluate the current protester insistence on saying no:

'Many of the activists I've interviewed are hostile to the very idea of a unifying theory, a set of bullet-point demands, a guru of a teleology. I'm not trying to provide any of these. For the youth, increasingly, knowledge is drawn, on demand and free, from online articles and commentaries and—often breathless—tweets. And for many, politics had become gestural: it is about refusing to engage with power on power's own terms; about action, not ideas; about the symbolic control of territory to create islands of utopia.' (Mason 2012, 3)

In Mason's account this saying no is closely connected to a disdain and fear of the politics of power that many social movements possess. He claims people know much more about the ugly workings of power and the corruption of institutional democracy than they used to and, as a consequence, people are repelled from this arena. The organizational arrangements that result from this anti-power politics contrast sharply with the 'official' institutional democratic structures of parties, elections and representatives. In their place, Mason finds protesters developing memes and horizontalism.

Mason is ambivalent and at times critical about the political potential of this mode of political organization. Whilst he appreciates the need to recognize the stinking corruption of corporate-institutional politics, he argues that the potential for these modes of organization to generate social change appears limited. That is, without a formalization of political objectives and programs it is difficult to see protest movements generating the required social transformations, either through reformist or revolutionary means. To some extent I would agree, but there is something to be added to this critique. Namely, the constitutive nature of refusal.

Žižek (2012) argues that the act of refusing to engage with today's institutional politics serves as a crucial, albeit only initial, foundation for emancipatory, progressive politics. In short, refusal can serve a political purpose. Žižek often identifies three types of revolutionary politics (see Krips 2012). Briefly stated these are (i) acts of over-conformity that, rather than resist power, actually over-conform to the existing structures of power, (ii) politics of subtraction, what might be called extreme acts of self-sacrifice and (iii) strategies of passive refusal, the type of politics Žižek has used Herman Melville's scrivener Bartleby to illustrate. Whilst there is some debate over the potential of Žižek's 'Bartleby politics' (Dean 2009; Vighi 2010), the central point Žižek makes using the literary figure is that any (revolutionary) political action must first gain some distance from the existing ideological constellation. In Žižek's Lacanian terms, this mode of politics opens a space to engage with the 'Real' and, as such, the potential to create a position from which to reinvent/replace the ideological constellation, and not simply be assigned a (non-revolutionary) place within the existent constellation. An act of refusal serves to deny interpellation:

'In his refusal of the Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it. This is how we pass from the politics of "resistance" or "protestation", which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation.' (Žižek 2006, 381–382)

This act of refusal is therefore not simply a basic starting point for political action, rather Žižek argues it must become a formative foundation for politics. To put it in different terms, this act of refusal is a founding premise of democracy itself: the always present potential for transformative social change (also see Rancière 1999):

'Bartleby's attitude is not merely the first, preparatory, stage for the second, more

"constructive", work of forming a new alternative order; it is the very source and background of this order, its permanent foundation. The difference between Bartleby's gesture of withdrawal and the formation of a new order is—again, and for the last time—that of parallax: the very frantic and engaged activity of constructing a new order is sustained by an underlying "I would prefer not to" which forever reverberates in it ...' (Žižek 2006, 382)

The act of refusal, the 'I'd prefer not to', is therefore the anti-enlightenment enlightenment position. It is the insistence on doubt and uncertainty that is the core assumption of Žižek's embrace of Beckett's 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (Žižek 2008). It serves to limit the association any subject and society has with its ideological form and, as such, leaves open the potential for any (failing) society to reinvent itself (i.e. allow for democratic revolutionary change; something not unfamiliar to a Jeffersonian understanding of democracy).

Of course, none of this should leave the politics of refusal un-problematized. Indeed, Mason's frustration with a lack of programmatic politics within today's protest movements is not unlike Žižek's own. However, Mason's accounting of how reluctant many protesters are to engage with institutional politics does under-appreciate the potentially productive function any such refusal might play. This refusal has helped to create a space of radical dis-engagement that has maintained some concern for structural economic and social change within protest movements and, by extension, more mainstream political debate. Furthermore, the disassociation created by refusal might well be central to any leftist emancipatory politics that has to deal with a history of over-identification with its own cause (see Žižek 2008).

### Why no change?

Much to his credit, Mason's account of recent protest movements does not shy away from

highlighting the need for structural economic change. His book is notable for the way in which it makes clear how today's global elite have failed to resolve any major structural antagonisms. Indeed, so bad are the 99%'s economic prospects today, Mason appears to have no hesitation in measuring up today's embryonic revolutionary movements to those epoch marking ones of the past. Mason makes the following distinction between today and 1848:

'When the Languedoc workers of 1848 demanded the nationalization of monopolies and the provision of cheap credit, these were not random wishes. The ideology of social-republicanism had been coherently expressed in the works of Louis Blanc ... What is striking about the revolutions of 2009–11, however, is the absence of a coherent left. Leninism is looking shrunken and distorted; horizontalism can stage a great demo, but does not know what it wants. Meanwhile, the mainstream left—Labourism, social democracy, the US Democrats and left-liberalism generally—appears politically confused.' (187)

For Mason then, we might live in revolutionary times (i.e. economic crisis, social unrest, etc.) but we are lacking any collective agenda that might see us (i.e. the left) do anything about it. Similar conclusions have been made by other commentators (see Badiou 2010).

The issue at large for the left is therefore not 'what is to be done', but rather how can we organize to engage in an agenda-making exercise. Again, Mason (2012) is skeptical whether an effective organization of today's left is possible:

'... the route away from horizontalism to more traditional structured politics looks blocked today: blocked by consciousness of how entrapped activists become when they enter structures like the trade unions, the US Democrats, social democracy and even the major NGOs'. (277)

The problem identified here is conformity and how our existent political structures act

to strip away the potential for radical change within any protest/political movement. We then return to Žižek's preoccupation: how to fight for social change without contributing to societal continuation?

Here clear differences exist between Mason and Žižek's perspectives. For Mason (2012, 294), the primary problem is organizational:

'... the revolutions remain trapped at the phase of ideology, culture and political debate. The real changes in the world desired by those who protest are still only achievable by those with hierarchical power ... It is no surprise to the social historian to find this extreme vigour of critical thought alongside seeping powerlessness.'

Mason is claiming that nascent revolutions have become mere protests. A failure to engage with the question of power (and related issues of order, hierarchy, representation, etc.) has ensured protests remain just that, protestations. Whilst Žižek understands ideology differently than Mason, he too is frustrated with the trappings of political debate. In his account of 2011, Žižek embraces Catherine Malabou's damning criticism of critical thinking and its inability to abandon the critical stance as the ultimate horizon of our thinking. For Malabou critical thought has failed to accomplish its own gesture and, as such, it has over-conformed to the existing structure of power.

Both Mason and Žižek therefore encourage their readers to engage with the question of political change, albeit in different ways. For the philosopher Žižek, the central concern remains how to escape an existent ideological constellation that itself defines your role and place within it. Mason is much less concerned with such theorizing. Rather the pressing questions for him appear those of institutional and social power. Yet despite their differences, the common thread running through both accounts is the necessity for normative political programming. For Mason, today's revolutions fail to follow the historical sequence

because they lack this component. For Žižek this failure is ultimately connected to the depoliticizing nature of liberal capitalist ideology. How then is a political program formulated that offers a revolutionary outcome?

The final section of this paper uses Mason and Žižek's comments on political action in an attempt to answer this question from the urbanist's perspective. I undertake this task with the understanding that today's economic and social crises are primarily urban (Harvey 2013). That is to say, both the (re)production of crisis and opposition to it have occurred within and through the urban landscape. As a starting point for this discussion, I draw on Mason's passing commentary on urban planning.

### Where is Stringer Bell?

The failing project of neoliberalism has inflicted regressive changes upon the social and political aspirations of the working classes. Progressive political goals related to such things as wages, housing security and health care that were once viewed as modest and reasonable are now almost unthinkable after decades of neoliberalism and its newly incarnate austere versions appear to be only reinforcing this retrenchment. As Mason (2013) observes:

'After the 1970s there was a sharp slowdown in the provision of social housing across the globe. In cities, the move away from state provision of services fuelled the rise of the informal economy and a growing inequality between rich and poor. As a result, we're having to ask ourselves a question that would have made the nineteenth-century fathers of city planning shudder: do we have to learn to live with slums forever?' (199)

This comment is indicative of the political situation leftists find themselves in today. No longer is it assumed that collective social action can eradicate the social ills of slums and poverty. Indeed, much of the language used within the academic left talks

of 'poverty reduction' and 'slum improvement', rather than poverty elimination and slum irradiation. As Mason asks, what would the likes of Geddes and Howard have to say about today's urban planners and their urban planet? Or perhaps the more interesting question would be: what would we make of these figures today? How would their grand schemes and lofty rhetoric be received within today's ideological constellation? It seems to me this question is a critical one for urbanists to answer, since it concerns the political deficit both Mason and Žižek highlight. Today we are faced with a world of protest, but little in the way of prescriptive and normative urban agendas. So how can we generate a way to talk about and implement a type of urbanism that would look familiar, at least in terms of social ambition, to the modernist progressives of the 19th century?

With respect to this question, Žižek's (2012) account of 2011 ends with an intriguing proposal:

'In 1929, when a journalist asked Stalin what characterized a good Bolshevik, his answer was a combination of Russian dedication and American pragmatic spirit. Today, eighty years later, one should add to the list innocent joy: what we need is a subject who combines the dedication of Jack Bauer, the inventive pragmatic spirit of Stringer Bell, and the innocently malicious joy of Homer Simpson.' (125)

The role of this personality is clear: to distort the future through the application<sup>1</sup> of a 'public use of reason' and an 'egalitarian universality of thought'. I do not think we can know what our (urban) political agenda would look like using this tri-partite personality, but it does offer a sense of how the reconstructing of a political program might progress.

It is unquestionable that any political movement will require huge amounts of dedication: which type does not! The requirement of innocence and joy within any emancipatory program is also clear given

the corrosive effect neoliberalism has had upon leftist thinking. Only through engaging with the utopian, hopeful and, to borrow from Andy Merrifield (2011), the magical, can the emancipatory promise of leftist thought be recovered. However, what of pragmatic spirit? Given Žižek's elevation of reason and universality, the induction of Stringer Bell might appear a strange addition to the revolutionary persona. However, I want to suggest this figure is the critical one, particularly for urbanists. This persona highlights the need to not only to engage with real problem solving (e.g. how to produce affordable and humane forms of housing etc.), but also to the requirement that the world of institutional and democratic politics is entered.

Stringer Bell is exemplary of this pragmatic spirit. Stringer Bell is *The Wire's* outlawed drug dealer who attempts to make legitimate his marginal activities, whilst at the same time avoiding incorporation into a world that would curtail his wealth-producing criminal and social activities. Should leftists today not be similar purveyors of illegitimate goods?

For leftist urbanists their illegitimate goods have to be the visions and schemes that parallel those proposed by 19th-century city planners. The production of pure critique (i.e. documenting the corrosive effects of capitalism) is, all too often, of little use value. As Mason intimates, these schemes would today appear radical and absurd, so grand and unrealistic as to be considered illegitimate. However, these are the goods we have to offer. Just as Stringer's source of engagement with the 'legitimate' world of real estate development comes from his illegitimate activities (i.e. monies from drug dealing), so critical urbanists enter the world of development corporations, public-private partnerships, consensus building and evidence-based policymaking with schemes for urban commons, cooperatives, public ownership and alternative tenures. The critical question to ask is therefore: how does Stringer manage to become a player beyond Baltimore's ghetto?

He does so by becoming embroiled in the dirty world of politics. This is the world that Mason finds protesters so reluctant to engage with. The tension is, of course, that Stringer loses his persona when he steps into this world. No longer just a drug dealer, he must exist in a no man's land; between the ghetto and city hall. How then to ensure our politics do not conform and the movement becomes marginalized from levers of power? Perhaps the solution is to insist on an 'egalitarian universality of thought' within and across each of our urban concerns. This makes the job of visioning an alternative future society redundant and replaces it with a requirement that our principles<sup>2</sup> be insisted upon across our works. To some extent, the task of critical urbanists must therefore be to move beyond criticism and engage in projects to repair and remake the urban landscapes we inherited from a failed neoliberalism.

Paul Mason's account of 2011 provides a great deal of inspiration for those willing to engage in this difficult and, admittedly, virtual task. His narration of economic crisis and global waves of protests leaves little doubt that we are experiencing a global crisis of historical proportions. The problems plaguing global capitalism are mounting, necessitating a debate about 'what is to be done'. As Mason rightly notes, this question has been largely ignored across protest movements, as the instruments of 'doing' are held in the corrupted and corrupting world of institutional politics. I have argued in this paper that there might be something to be valued in this refusal to engage. However, there is clearly a need to formulate a normative agenda that takes us beyond this moment. This formative project is vast and its ultimate form is difficult to speculate upon. One can therefore only proceed from their own position. To be sure, this proceeding must be determined and joyous, yet it must also be pragmatic. Here, as the pages of this journal demonstrate, critical urbanists have much to offer. However, we could use some more of Stringer Bell. We need more illegitimate

goods to purvey (e.g. alternate urban economies, new housing tenures, new tax arrangements, new neighborhood political institutions, etc.), and these must be brought into the legitimate world without compromise. Without any such effort, our protests will only amount to a call to be treated better by our elites. We will remain the drug dealers and our neoliberal governors will remain the corrupted politicians and cops.

## Notes

- 1 Given Mason's comments, perhaps we might view this as a reapplication of the public use of reason and egalitarian universality.
- 2 This assumes that 'critical urbanists', and leftists more generally, do actually share a common set of principles.

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