



## City

analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

ISSN: 1360-4813 (Print) 1470-3629 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

# Editorial: why not anti-urban?

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To cite this article: Mark Davidson (2018) Editorial: why not anti-urban?, *City*, 22:4, 451-459, DOI: [10.1080/13604813.2018.1505080](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1505080)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1505080>



Published online: 20 Sep 2018.



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# Editorial: why not anti-urban?

The arc of this issue's papers—Grenfell, spectacular waste, destruction by elites, debt enslavement—should make us question why we are not all anti-urbanists. Do the papers not present us with too many uncomfortable truths? They show that despite the countless efforts of well-intentioned reformers, our industrial cities, and their progeny post-industrial cities, continue to (re)produce dense concentrations of poverty, enable the exploitative processes of uneven development, and perpetuate innumerable social ills. The urbanization process itself is ever more driven by profit-maximizing accumulators, most of whom care little about how cities have nearly always been the crucibles for our most precious manifestations of beauty, nobility and the sacrosanct<sup>1</sup>. We can add to this pile of urbanized misery super-charged gerrymandering, election hacking, and nativist populism. All of which provide convincing evidence that the political promises of the city—the agora, the demos, civility—have been renegeed upon and sepulchred. And then, to throw more dirt on our oppidan corpse, those productive social tensions of the urban melting pot, that ability of the city to turn migrant into citizen, are today stultified by imposed- and self-segregations. Why not, given all we know, reject the idea that cities promise emancipation? Why not be anti-city?

Some great thinkers have, of course, famously made this choice. The messy dynamism of urbanity has always found detractors. Despite John Winthrop's ambitions for 'a city on the hill', anti-urban sentiments run deep in the United States<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps paradoxically, the country's most literate president provided some of the more damning

criticisms of urban life. In public and personal correspondence, Jefferson wrote keelhauling descriptions of the political consequences of urbanization. For Jefferson, the urbanization of the early American republic only promised to crush the chances that American's might nurture the enlightened political values that had motivated his writing of the *Declaration of Independence*:

'The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.'<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson's time in Paris as Minister to France undoubtedly colored his distaste of the city. In the late 1780s, Jefferson witnessed urban neighborhoods and communities that would occupy the attentions of journalists, writers, civic politicians, scholars and do-gooders of many stripes well into the late 1800s. Yet, when Jefferson was levered out of Paris by Washington's request that he return to become Secretary of State, he left the City of Light as an urbanite. In Paris, Jefferson's home was a salon, rooms filled with acquaintances from near and far, often indulging in informal 'Virginian' dining, discussing the latest scientific advances, and sharing the host's love of French wines. This urbanity, and the constituent desire to embrace the maelstrom of modernity (see Berman 1982), would return home with Jefferson when he took up offices at 57 Maiden Lane, New York. In a fashion which would not shock New Yorkers today, but surely would have raised eyebrows in the late 18th century, Jefferson continued to enjoy his outré bright

red and gold laced French clothes upon his return (Jefferson 1951)<sup>4</sup>.

In a 1787 letter to James Madison<sup>5</sup>, Jefferson would identify the source of his anti-urbanism. The following excerpt from the letter shows how political concerns motivated Jefferson's fear of urbanization in a young United States. It was not a disgust of filthy neighborhoods, unknown types or even some Conradian, pre-revolutionary sense about the simmering incivility of great towns; all which Jefferson experienced in Paris. No, what motivated Jefferson's distaste of the urban was the perception that establishing a republican democracy within the context of industrial urbanization was impossible:

'Educate and inform the whole mass of the people, enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve it, and it requires no very high degree of education to convince them of this. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.—After all, it is my principle that the will of the majority should prevail. If they approve the proposed constitution in all it's parts, I shall concur in it cheerfully, in hopes they will amend it whenever they shall find it works wrong. This reliance cannot deceive us, as long as we remain virtuous; and I think we shall be that, as long as agriculture is our principal object, which will be the case while there remain vacant lands in any part of America. When we get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, we shall become corrupt as in Europe, and go to eating one another as they do there.'

Jefferson thought, as did many of his contemporaries (Wood 1993), that establishing a democracy meant citizens must believe in and enact democratic principles. In his preferred vision of a yeoman's polity, the equitable division of lands would enable citizens to become self-reliant and thus provide the conditions necessary to create an enlightened political community of equals. In Paris and elsewhere, rapid industrialization and urban growth meant any such arrangement was

impossible; the interconnectedness, mutual dependences and critically, commercialization of urban life, meant egalitarianism had to be pursued using other means. As Marx and Engels would later observe, the city's waged labor relations, rampant exploitation and economic dependencies, sobered any hope of democracy becoming the mass' central concern in the commercial metropolis.

Although Jefferson is often presented as America's anti-urbanist *par excellence*, as with just about every aspect of Jefferson's life, his anti-urbanism is contradictory. His love of the urbane contrasts sharply with his rejection of an urbanized American future. It is therefore worth probing a little further why Jefferson reasoned against an urban republic. Jefferson feared that the urbanization of the population would make it impossible for citizens to live a public life. As a reasoned social arrangement, Jefferson thought democracy necessitated that: 'Every man is under the natural duty of contributing to the necessities of the society; and this is all the laws should enforce on him.'<sup>6</sup> As historian Wood (1993) has argued, Jefferson, along with most of his fellow Founding Fathers, drew on the classical idea of a 'public life' to idealize how citizens would come together to enact government in the majority's interest. As office holders, Jefferson and his contemporaries looked to ancient Rome and read Cicero to learn how to understand and enact their newly-acquired democratic obligations. All of this required, Jefferson thought, a degree of self-sufficiency, so that private interests could not compromise public obligation. There is much that can be said about this proposition, but I must limit myself to a single observation here. Jefferson thought citizens required certain material resources to act out their democratic responsibilities. His anti-urbanism is therefore based, at least in part, on the worry that early industrial urbanization provided few mechanisms to ensure a democratic distribution of material

resources. Although Jefferson's extensive support of French revolutionaries suggest he did not think urbanization incompatible with democratic liberty, he certainly thought that urbanization made it much more difficult to impart citizens with a democratic ethos. Writing in 1808, Jefferson continued to think that it was this ethos that would ensure the continuation of democratic government: 'If our fellow-citizens, now solidly republican, will sacrifice favoritism towards men for the preservation of principle, we may hope that no divisions will again endanger a degeneracy in our government.'<sup>7</sup>

We are now, of course, at a different historical conjuncture. Democracy has flourish (and in some places declined) around the globe, giving little credence to the notion that democracy has some essential correspondence to geography. Yet we are still grappling with the problem that made Jefferson anti-urban: how do we create the material conditions necessary to enable democratic life? In Jefferson's yeoman ideal, the uncolonized American continent would provide the land necessary to create an agrarian citizenry, each homestead largely self-reliant and committed to democratic cooperation. If this prescription was ever correct, its moment of applicability is gone forever. Today our answers to the problem of realizing democracy—to making a community of citizens—must be different. The solutions will inevitably have to be urban. But, given where this discussion started, is this feasible, or even desirable? An unflinching affirmative to the latter means, I think, that we must wager a 'yes' on the former.

The pages of this journal are no stranger to the attempt to provide answers to this democratic problem (e.g. Catterall 2016; Chatterton 2010; Farías 2016). In recent years, many of the journal's contributors have taken up Lefebvre's (1968) provocative 'right to the city' to rethink politics on our urban planet (e.g. Marcuse 2014; Woessner 2009). The idea's most notable proponent has been Harvey (2008, 2013). For Harvey,

the idea of a 'right to the city' provides a mechanism to re-imagine collectivist politics in our intensely urban time:

'The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.' (2008, 23)

Harvey here uses 'the right to the city' to frame a similar problem to that which precedes Jefferson's anti-urbanism. Namely, how do we organize material resources and political power in a way that is emancipatory and egalitarian? For Harvey, just as with Jefferson, this is a problem of dispersing power and enabling individuals and communities to make their own political decisions. Now, I do not want to push this comparison any further, although Hardt (2007) has made convincing arguments about why critical thought should be more concerned with Jefferson. Jefferson remains a paragon of liberal democracy (see Fatten and Ramazi 2004) and Harvey (2013) is a renowned critic of liberal democracy. It also has to be said that Harvey's (2008) concern with democracy post-dates Jefferson's conceptual world, Harvey's position being about 'greater democratic control over the production and utilization of the surplus' and 'establishing democratic management over its urban deployment constitutes the right to the city.' These are classically Marxian concerns of the mid-1800s that simply do not translate into the writings of Jefferson. And yet the insertion of the city—or specifically 'the right to the city'—disrupts the classical Marxian framing of democracy. It moves a concern with democracy back into a context familiar to Jefferson. The 'right to the city' makes democracy a distinctly geographical problem again. It asks how do we create the

conditions necessary to enable the egalitarian exercise of power? In his answer to this problem, Harvey (2013) endorses Bookchin's (1990) notion of 'confederalism'. Bookchin's idea of 'confederalism' can be loosely described as based on municipal assemblies enacting direct democracy and forming a networked confederation to resolve matters concerning the collective. In 'confederalism', municipal institutions and active participation therefore provide the bedrock for democratic citizenship. The mythical Jeffersonian yeoman farmstead this is not. However, the democratic problem that animates Jefferson's anti-urban agrarianism is present here. Echoing aspects of Jefferson's concerns, Bookchin finds metropolitan government, unengaged citizens, and failed representational institutions as threats to democracy. It is just that Bookchin finds it possible to imagine an urbanized political structure that could, at least in theory, be capable of realizing democracy.

Reading Jefferson's anti-urbanism in this way can be instructive because it situates the urban problem as historical. For Jefferson, the choice between an agrarian and metropolitan society was real. Today, things are different. Urbanization is an unstoppable force. But we would be mistaken to think that Jefferson's commitment to democracy was contingent on agrarianism. Indeed, his sustained support of the French Revolution is testament to the fact he did not think urbanism incompatible with democratic revolution. It is therefore possible to answer the question of 'why we are not anti-urban?' in the same way that the likes of Jefferson, Paine and Lafayette dealt with the question of democracy itself. They all advocated democracy—what Lincoln would later describe in the Gettysburg Address as 'government by the people, of the people, and for the people.'—not because they thought it inevitable or eminently achievable. Rather, they simply thought that society ought to be democratic. As Paine (1791) puts it, it is just how we *ought* to conceive of government itself:

'That which is called government, or rather that which we ought to conceive government to be, is no more than some common center in which all the parts of society unite. This cannot be accomplished by any method so conducive to the various interests of the community, as by the representative system. It concentrates the knowledge necessary to the interest of the parts, and of the whole. It places government in a state of constant maturity. It is, as has already been observed, never young, never old. It is subject neither to nonage, nor dotage. It is never in the cradle, nor on crutches. It admits not of a separation between knowledge and power, and is superior, as government always ought to be, to all the accidents of individual man, and is therefore superior to what is called monarchy.' (np)

The same enlightened reasoning that creates a belief in democracy (see Rancière 2005) should ensure that whatever difficulties the historical moment presents, our commitment remains. At this moment, Jefferson's geographical dilemma no longer applies. To be anti-urban is now, *de facto*, a reactionary and romantic position. If democracy is to be achieved today, it must be urban. Of course, reaffirming our commitment does not mean the democratic problem is lessened. In fact, Jefferson might still have the last laugh. Contemporary urbanization has created severe new challenges to the democratic idea. Whether a meaningful version of democracy can be realized in our post-political times (Rancière 2005; Žižek 2011) remains an open question. Yet every long journey starts with a single step and one place we can begin this long march is with the intent of our reading. As the reader follows the arc of this issue, this need to read with intent should become apparent. The litany of urban problems and challenges documented requires we read the situation not as it is, but how it ought to be. This can be more difficult than it appears, although modest tokens of help are out there (see Davidson and Iveson 2015).

### Tragedies and failed solutions . . .

The first paper of the issue, Gordon MacLeod's account of the Grenfell disaster, documents tragedy at its purest. The horrific loss of life, corporate malfeasance and heart wrenching predictability of the disaster are difficult to confront using cold scholarly abstractions. The individual stories of loss recounted by residents puts our urban problem in a confronting context. How can we possibly expect the urban poor and working classes, those who most experience the risks imposed by deregulating and deathly housing policies, to be concerned with enacting democracy? In addition to the mundane hardships of reproducing daily life, the Grenfell residents were tasked with making their building habitable and safe. They found themselves in a society where these fights often appear like the pursuit of self-interest; a competitive system whereby the loudest get heard and the voiceless ruthlessly ignored. There can be few better examples of democracy failing. If our cities' residents cannot be afforded a safe home and have the resources necessary to be functioning citizen, then we can neither expect people to act as citizens nor find ourselves fortunate to live with the securities of democratic government.

We make a sharp transition between MacLeod's accounting of Grenfell Tower and John Hutnyk's excavation of Marx's dealings with the Indian subcontinent. Yet, lines of connection between the two papers are there. As Hutnyk demonstrates, Marx's concerns with India are often filtered through discussions of the East India Company. As a most effective vehicle of colonial plunder and exploitation, the East India Company played a not insignificant role in making London an imperial capital city. Based in the City of London's Leadenhall Street, on the site now occupied by Lloyd's of London, the East India Company would provide some of the profits necessary to transform West London into the haven of wealth it remains today. When one looks on a map at the site of

Grenfell Tower, the neighboring mansions of Kensington, Chelsea and Belgravia are yet another reminder of Engels' descriptions of how wealth and poverty reside (un)easily together in the capitalist city. We should not forget that these disparities—which show the Grenfell tragedy to be such an avoidable horror—are founded by long histories of illegitimate accumulation and wealth conversation. So, to get back to Hutnyk's central concern, does an imagining of Marx's exposure to Calcutta change the direction of Marxian analysis? Or should we expect the logical analysis to remain unchanged? To be sure, the tragedy that occurred at Grenfell Tower would not surprise Marx or Engels, but if Marx had gone to Asia, would Marx's analysis have developed differently? Hutnyk suggests Marx's interpretation of the marketplace and the dynamism of colonial economies would certainly have evolved, likely causing wide-ranging change and refinement to the broader theoretical framework.

The next two papers tackle questions of architecture and power. Ferreri and Trogel's account of privatized public parks remains situated in London and explores how publicness is manifest as privatization in spectacular urban development. Publicness, that lifeblood of democratic politics that so concerned revolutionaries such as Jefferson, has now been under sustained attack for decades. Although this attack is often carried out for reasons of efficiency and cost, the privatization of public spaces has been consistently demonstrated to have deleterious political consequences. In London's Olympic Park, privatization was incorporated into an attempt to make the park a more public space. In tracing out the contradictions of this effort, Ferreri and Trogel suggest that mixing public and private is like mixing oil and water. Despite the good-intentions of planners and designers, London's Olympic Park has become a space of spectacle, to the detriment of public life.

We might then put London's Olympic Park into the lineage of elite-driven planning that Stephen Graham puts elevated freeways.

Graham's paper identifies the peculiar adoption of elevated highways in the Global South. While a city like Boston, Massachusetts, spent over \$24bn of state and federal monies to bury its highways under the city, elites across the Global South are installing new elevated roadways. As Graham skips from one example to the next, the echoes of history are deafening. Across the Global South, elevated highways are being used to clear slums, forcefully displace residents, and renewal schemes produce ill-suited 'affordable housing.' The most egregious examples make Robert Moses look like an enlightened progressive. The resurgent popularity of elevated highways across the Global South therefore begs for an explanation. Is this about a lack of international knowledge transfer? Is it about the power of false promises, and the enduring allure of modernist city planning? Or is it urbanism driven by the greed of elites, where urban planning solutions are picked off the shelf if they can be used to entrench and enhance existing distributions of wealth and power?

The final two articles move closer to the coal face of citizenship. My own contribution examines the attempts of a small Californian city to make its governance more inclusive and transparent after a dramatic bankruptcy. This is not, for a change, a story of elites instigating hollow governance reforms. Participatory budgeting emerged in the City of Vallejo from reforms intended to reorganize the city's regime politics. The paper examines how, over the course of four years, the participatory budgeting program has become less a vehicle of reform and more aligned with the city's historical political priorities; the same priorities that landed it in bankruptcy courts. William Kutz's paper follows this with another story of inertia. Kutz examines Moroccan policy initiatives that attempted to expand homeownership using Western models of housing finance. Kutz shows how this model conflicted with the cultural priorities of many Moroccans, both in terms of offering undesirable financial products and architectural forms that are ill-suited to presiding social norms. In different

ways, the two papers demonstrate how difficult it is to reform the urban process. Established institutional politics can resist policy changes even in times of crisis and seemingly efficient models of housing finance can be negated and rejected. Placed alongside Graham's examination of elevated roadways, where urban change is implemented with the meat ax<sup>8</sup>, the two final papers raise questions about the methods necessary to create any sort of urban transformation.

The issue's 'Debates' papers are united by a shared concern with the representation of social relations in urban development. Hutnyk introduces us to 'the museum of impossible objects' in his attempt to make visible working-class communities that have been continually erased by prevalent waterfront simulacrum. The challenge here is significant. Across the globe, urban waterfronts have been the subject of abrupt transitions. One day, waterfronts are the domain of dockers and spartan pubs, the next they become populated by luxury condos and your next generation of boutique coffee roaster. Such urban transitions require forms of social and cultural erasure that Hutnyk's proposal seeks to contest. Cauvain's paper picks up on the theme of failings of contemporary urban social policy. Despite sustainability being popularly embraced—who is against sustainability?—the social part of triple-bottom-line sustainability continues to receive little attention by policy makers and scholars. Cauvain identifies several reasons why the purveyors of knowledge might be, at least, partially responsible for this state of affairs. Several actionable recommendations are suggested so that we can take social sustainability more seriously.

#### For persisting and reading as democratic CITY-zens

'What is a city in the late twentieth century? And, just as important a question, what could and should it be? When? Where? How?'  
(Catterall 1996, 1)

These are the first words to be printed in this journal. They fuse the analytical with the normative. Both questions will always be with us. Today, the evolution of the city only seems to hasten. For example, the penetration of information technologies and financialization into the urban process is creating forms of connectedness and social relations we only partially understand. The second question demands our work always be something more than critical. The specific demand is that we know not only where we are going, but also why we have decided to take the journey. This requires the kind of collective and varied conversation that this journal has long provided. Without the injunctions of things like the CITY mission, it is far too easy to remain purely critical and prescriptive, neglecting the normative conversations that have underpinned every great leap forward. But shouldn't this requirement to confront the normative come easily?

Jefferson believed that everyone was made a moral being. He wrote:

'Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality.'<sup>9</sup>

Jefferson is not alone in making this argument. Socrates, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith and CS Lewis talk of inner daemons, moral imperatives, the internal witness, and conscience respectively, to say something similar. And yet despite this innate moral faculty they claim we all possess, we are also adept at placing what should be related dialogues into segregated silos. This can have the effect of generating alluring conversations about seemingly all-powerful forces—the financialization of everyday life, the neoliberalisation of city government, the privatization of public space—that make discussions of the normative dimension seem unattainable or even useless. As Slavoj Žižek (2001, np) has provocatively argued,

our predicament seems to have generated modes of scholarship that forego the moral and the normative for the cynical and sardonic:

'With regard to this radical chic, the first gesture toward Third Way ideologists and practitioners should be that of praise: they at least play their game in a straight way, and are honest in their acceptance of the global capitalist coordinates, in contrast with pseudo-radical academic leftists who adopt toward the Third Way an attitude of utter disdain while their own radicality ultimately amounts to an empty gesture that obliges no one to anything determinate.'

A great challenge for this journal, and any reader of this issue, is therefore how to remain engaged with the normative—what ought to be—when incentives can direct us away from this conversation, and when the possibilities of action seem so remote. For those that believe in an innate sense of morality, it might be that we just cannot avoid normative evaluation. However, we can certainly bury, ignore and displace it (see Sloterdijk 1988). Remaining an urbanist and CITY-zen in spite of prevailing conditions is to both recognize our historical contingencies and moral obligations. Although Jefferson found urbanization a threat to his overriding commitment to democracy, we need not make the same choice, even if we accept the view that certain facets of (post-)industrial cities create severe challenges to democracy.

We might then take a lead from the persistence of Jefferson's friend and inspiration, Thomas Paine. In 1795, Paine published *Agrarian Justice*. As his last written work, the pamphlet was completed after his return to the United States from revolutionary France. Paine had served on the revolutionary government's National Convention before being imprisoned and sentenced to death in 1793 by Robespierre's Montagnards. He narrowly avoided execution and was denied assistance by George Washington's government; something that Paine never forgave. And yet upon returning to the United States, and despite ample reason to settle scores and/or pursue



personal gain, he returned to the problem that occupied him throughout his life: how to create a morally legitimate form of government. In *Agrarian Justice* he attempts to solve the problem that motivated Jefferson's anti-urbanism. Rejecting any kind of romantic agrarianism, and remaining resolutely modern, he presented ground-breaking social insurance and basic income proposals. The effect of Paine's proposals was to create a vision for the egalitarian distribution of material resources that is compatible with the modern city, and, indeed, the modern rural. *Agrarian Justice* is that rare example of political writing that confronts the historical moment and overtly attempts to mobilize a normative position. It is also testament to the depth of Paine's commitment to democracy and equality. A glance back at the first two sentences of this journal might therefore give us cause to retroactively make Paine the first CITY-zen, and provide reason enough to remain resolute urbanists.

## Notes

- 1 This triumvirate was popularized by Mister Rogers.
- 2 All writing is, in some degree, of a place. This editorial is no different, in that it was written during a visit to Washington D.C. This should explain the apparent preoccupation with Thomas Jefferson and his inspirational friend Thomas Paine.
- 3 Thomas Jefferson, Notes on Virginia, 1785 query 19. Available at: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/jeffvir.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/jeffvir.asp).
- 4 Isaac Granger Jefferson, one of Jefferson's slaves, references his master's dress in his 1847 memoir: 'He brought a great many clothes from France with him: a coat of blue cloth trimmed with gold lace; cloak trimmed so too: dar say it weighed fifty pounds: large buttons on the coat as big as half a dollar; cloth set in the button: edge shine like gold: in summer he war silk coat, pearl buttons.'
- 5 From Thomas Jefferson to Uriah Forrest, with Enclosure, 31 December 1787. Available at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0490>.
- 6 Thomas Jefferson to Francis Gilmer, 1816. Available at: [http://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mtj/mtj1/049/049\\_0206\\_0208.pdf](http://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mtj/mtj1/049/049_0206_0208.pdf).
- 7 Thomas Jefferson to Richard M. Johnson, 1808. Available at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-7586>.
- 8 Reference from Robert Moses' infamous quip: 'When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.'
- 9 Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, Paris Aug. 10. 1787. Available at: <http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/1297>.

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