Urban Debt, Neoliberalism and the Politics of the Commons

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Abstract
The rural/metropolitan/wilderness hybrid central to urban shrinkage directly challenges a commonly held belief that a city consists of a dense concentration of people living in a limited geographical area, one where the primary means of production is non-agricultural. In addition, the urban condition of shrinkage tests the dominant current of growth management that has guided urban design, development, and land use. In this essay we will explore how this hybrid presents an alternative to the production and realization of surplus value that predominates throughout the contemporary landscape of neoliberal planetary urbanization. It will be argued that this process of urbanization is premised upon modalities of urban commoning, or practices that bring a variety of social and environmental struggles into relationship with each other, dismantling the apparatuses of capture that bring land-use and the collective energies animating available land under the control of capital.

Keywords
commons, Hardt, Marx, Negri, neoliberalism, planetary urbanization

One day in the midst of winter, whilst visiting Detroit in the southeastern corner of Michigan, I witnessed how still a city could become. Admittedly most cities are hushed by the cold and snow, so what was different about Detroit? The answer arose from the city’s sounds, rhythms, textures and pressure points. These neither built to a crescendo, nor were they defined by modulations in key, all of which are qualities I find characterize some other favorite cities of mine: Chicago, Mumbai, New York, Tel Aviv, or Vienna. Life in Detroit was briskly quiet. Feral structures populated the inner-city landscape, contrasting with the manicured lawns of the suburbs. A dissonant song-line wove throughout the
downtown neighborhoods with its unfilled streets, rusting remains, overgrown lots, and crumbling buildings.

The inner core of Detroit was virtually gutted at the end of the 20th century, and by the beginning of the 21st century it was quite simply barren. And I don’t mean ‘barren’ in the sense that it was an alienating landscape packed with glass and steel, filled with the usual array of architectural monuments to capitalism and economic progress. There was a disquieting bleakness overlapping with the desolation of vacant lots, as reminders of this once ‘Automotive Manufacturing Capital of the World’ filled with bustling crowds and a thriving economy remained scattered throughout. Despite the emptiness, this was also ‘a place of unpredictable encounters’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 252), for there were all kinds of sociality occurring amongst the ecological growth and remaining residents.

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Urban Shrinkage

Neoliberal policies that led to massive economic restructuring initiatives from the 1970s onwards have resulted in significant population declines for many cities in the West and former Eastern Bloc. As the global market provided new sources of cheap non-unionized labor, mass layoffs followed after manufacturing moved to the Global South. When the success of a city no longer depended upon producing goods and products, and if it failed to quickly reinvent its economic base and identity, it often entered the hit list of shrinkage. Examples include Liverpool (UK), which lost 48.5 percent of its population from 1930 to 2002; Halle (Germany), which after reunification lost 25.4 percent of its population from 1989 to 2003; and Detroit (USA), which from 1950 to 2004 lost 51 percent of its population (Oswalt and Reiniets, 2006: 148–50).
In the United States it was the Great Lakes Region (commonly referred to as the ‘rustbelt’ and where Detroit is situated) that was hardest hit by the social and economic changes brought on by post-industrialization and economic restructuring. Overseas investment in research and development for US companies approximately doubled from 1985 to 1991, whilst in the US it came to a grinding halt. With the outsourcing of labor, research, and development, the closure of North American factories followed. For many manufacturing cities in the US this resulted in a dramatic decline in population, high unemployment, and home foreclosures. It was not only the loss of manufacturing that changed the landscape of US industrial cities. Suburbanization also led to decentralization trends in the job market, further compounding the uneven geographies of class, race, and gender endemic to the US urban landscape. The racial segregation of US suburbia meant that minority African American populations were further disadvantaged when it came to attaining whatever employment prospects remained post-industrialization (Zax and Kain, 1996). Together these factors – post-industrialization, suburbanization, racially skewed unemployment, population decline, and the subsequent decline in the tax base – steadily led to the chronic impoverishment of downtown US rustbelt cities such as Cleveland, Detroit, Flint, Toledo, and Youngstown.

In 1990 unemployment in inner city Detroit was at 20 percent (Mouw, 2000: 736). The loss in manufacturing jobs disproportionately impacted African American workers with the firms nearest to the African American population closing or relocating. With the suburbanization of employment during the ‘80s in Detroit, it was the ‘typical black worker’ who ‘experienced a much greater degree of job loss than did the typical white worker’ (2000: 738). Within a 10-mile radius of Detroit, approximately 100,000 jobs for the average Detroit black worker were lost between 1980 and 1990, whilst the ‘typical white worker experienced little job loss’ (2000: 738). The spatial redistribution of employment to suburban Detroit resulted in ‘large migrations of the white population from the central city to the suburbs’, but the same trend did not occur amongst the city’s African American population (2000: 740). Along with unemployment, the decline in population, and abandoned real estate came increased drug use. From 1986–8 arrests for narcotics violations throughout metropolitan Detroit grew from 900 to 16,000, overrunning city and county boundaries (Haaga et al., 1992: v). By July 2013 Detroit had become the largest city in the US to file for bankruptcy.

A similar story of population shrinkage happening in tandem with growing poverty and unemployment occurred in Liverpool (UK). At the beginning of the 20th century the city had a thriving harbor-based economy built around the railways, the docks along the Mersey, and a steady supply of cheap, unskilled labor. The city was a key ingredient for
trade throughout the Lancashire region and the Empire as a whole, earning it the title of being second to London in importance – the ‘Second City’ of the British Empire. In the 1930s it had a population of 870,000, with the poorest residents concentrated in tiny terrace houses in the districts to the north and east of the city. In an effort to address slum-like conditions, the welfare state constructed public housing on the outskirts, nearly doubling the city’s building stock. After the Second World War slum clearance began, de-densifying and breaking up Liverpool’s urban fabric. As in the US, a series of suburban developments were constructed which replaced remaining substandard housing and basically turned the city inside out (Misselwitz, 2004: 115–18). By 1950 the textile industry slowed and Liverpool’s docks started to come to a standstill with layoffs following. Between 1978 and 1981 approximately 18 percent of the city’s jobs were lost.

Following the onslaught of de-industrialization came the neoliberal policies of Thatcher, who set out to limit the role of local municipalities and replace them with the private sector. In 1988 Thatcher replaced the Merseyside County Council of Liverpool and large tracts of public land were sold off to private investors, once more transforming the urban fabric as six to eight units per hectare stood in place of what was once 50 to 60 units. Unemployment continued soaring and in the ’90s the unemployment rate in the working-class district of Everton was at 44 percent with one in two households relying upon some form of welfare to survive (Oswalt and Reiniets, 2006: 148–9). The Toxteth riots of 1981, rising crime and unemployment prompted a series of defensive residential developments to be constructed – cul-de-sac, private housing estates, and extensive surveillance systems – further suburbanizing and de-densifying the city. Today Liverpool’s population is approximately half what it was in the 1930s (Misselwitz, 2004: 115–18) but, unlike Detroit, it has reinvented its identity and turned into an important cultural hub.

It is worth noting that Detroit and Liverpool are just two examples of urban shrinkage that occurred post-industrialization and with the advent of the global free market economy. There are many others (Manchester, UK; Ivanova, Russia; Ruhr Valley, Germany; Hakodate, Japan) that I cannot explore in more detail here. That said, the wave of shrinkage that occurred toward the latter part of the 20th century is not the end of the story. More recently, the real estate crisis of 2007–12 has seen the shrinkage of post-industrial cities spread to more prosperous corners of the property market, such as suburban development tracts and wealthier corners of the US and European real estate markets.

The US foreclosure crisis began in 2007 because of poor underwriting standards in the subprime mortgage industry (predatory lending practices to non-traditional borrowers) and falling house prices that left homeowners with negative equity. As investors lost confidence in the value of sub-prime mortgages and borrowers started defaulting on
their loans, banks were faced with a liquidity problem as the land and homes they repossessed were worth less than the outstanding loans. In simple terms, financial institutions entered a crisis (symbolized by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008), causing credit to dry up and the economy to dramatically slow; this in turn led to a drop in consumer confidence and spending, job losses, and the devaluation of assets.

The 2008 US Emergency Economic Stabilization Act gave the Secretary of the Treasury the authority to buy up distressed assets in an effort to save the financial and insurance sector. The US$700 billion bail-out was premised on the idea that the corporate sector is too big to fail. Put differently, it was a form of corporate welfare paid for by public funds. Nouriel Roubini and Stephen Mihm have proposed that the bail-outs should have been conditional upon a bonus escrow system; this would have de-incentivized the risky behavior arising from large bonuses made in response to short-term gains (Roubini and Mihm, 2010). In a similar vein Nobel Laureate and former chief economist of the World Bank Joseph E. Stiglitz advocates the need for more government regulation of markets in an effort to minimize the risks posed by negative externalities (Stiglitz, 2010).

Stiglitz has pushed back against the myth that the global financial crisis was an unforeseeable and unpredictable event. The Asian financial crisis of 1997–8, he says, was an unheeded warning sign of what lay ahead, namely that financial instability would move from the outer rings of the global economy to the center (USA). He debunks the commonly held belief that markets are efficient, explaining that markets do not self-correct and the existence of negative externalities makes them deeply flawed and inefficient. Roubini and Mihm have also sharply criticized the view that markets are inherently rational and self-regulating. Like Stiglitz, Roubini predicted early on that the world would be encountering a financial crisis that would start out by hitting Wall Street and the US financial sector before becoming global in its scope (Roubini and Mihm, 2010).

By 2008 the US financial crisis had gone global. In Spain foreclosures started amongst lower-income homeowners then crept into wealthier parts of Spanish society. By 2012 it was the Spanish upper middle class that made up 60 percent of foreclosures in Madrid (Smyth and Penty, 2012). Sadly, many Spanish foreclosures included not just young first homebuyers but also their parents, who served as guarantors on their mortgages. In the UK the Council of Mortgage Lenders reported that there were approximately 46,000 properties repossessed in 2009. This figure represented an increase of 6000 repossessions as compared to the previous year (Osborne, 2010). Figures released from the Rics European Housing Review show that from 2007 to 2012 prices for the UK housing market fell overall by one-third. Meanwhile, in 2011, the
Irish Republic housing market was one of the most distressed with house prices falling approximately 11 percent over a 12-month period (BBC, 2012).

In 2008 foreclosure filings in the US had grown 81 percent, marking an increase of 225 percent on what they were in 2006 (Christie, 2009). As borrowers defaulted on their mortgage payments and lenders took ownership of their properties, urban shrinkage moved from the rustbelt to the cities of the sunbelt. States such as Arizona, California, Florida, and Nevada were amongst those hardest hit by the ‘Great Recession’. A trail of empty and sometimes half-built structures were perforating the homogeneous and orderly landscapes of suburban developments.

On 12 August 2010 RealtyTrac published the US Foreclosure Market Report for the month of July 2010. There were 325,229 foreclosure filings (auction and bank repossession, default) reported during that time. This marks a 4 percent increase from the previous month and a 10 percent decrease when compared with July 2009. With one in every 82 Nevada housing units receiving a foreclosure filing, that state reported the highest foreclosure rate in the US. This was followed by Arizona, then Florida and California. Coming in fifth place was Idaho, with one in every 240 housing units receiving a foreclosure filing. The report noted that over 50 percent of the nation’s total number of properties which received foreclosure notices came from five states. Following in the order from highest to lowest, these comprise: California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, and Arizona. Despite California’s filing notice dropping 38 percent from those reported in July 2009, the state still reported that 66,910 properties received a foreclosure notice in July 2010 (RealtyTrac, 2010).

Dairy cows hovering alongside the largely vacant Charter Pointe suburban development in Idaho signal a dramatic change in the suburban form of the US. It appears the era of the American Dream is imploding as single-family homes with white picket fences, neatly cropped front lawns, two-car garages, and backyard swimming pools were being vacated, boarded up, raided, and filled with weeds and overgrown lawns. Basically, the collapse of the real-estate market left many US suburbs in ruin and, at the time of writing, the future of McMansion subdivisions and low-density suburbia was looking grim indeed. The global financial crisis resulted in entire urban neighborhoods being littered with deteriorating abandoned or half-built homes. This set in play a vicious cycle as municipal revenues dropped along with the falling property values. As neighborhoods became distressed by urban shrinking, the question of how to revitalize the communities left behind grew increasingly urgent to address.

And so we return to the opening scene of me standing alone in the middle of an empty downtown residential street in inner-city Detroit with boarded-up burnt-out houses in front and behind me and the realization that what I was encountering was life in slow motion. Yet regardless, or
should I say in spite of this, there was an astonishing ensemble of forces: vibrant pockets of wildlife married with abandoned industrial areas, and reclaimed deserted structures which gracefully stood in defiance against the encroaching emptiness. Ecology, that untamed dimension of material life in the raw, was returning here, slowly claiming the asphalt, inhabiting the buildings left behind, and repossessing private property on its own terms. The remaining residents were pushing back against the drug dealers, meth houses, crime, unemployment, and hunger that had decimated their vacated neighborhoods, adopting the overgrown lots and putting these to work growing food, developing youth job-training programs, providing support for recovering drug addicts, and generally developing community well-being. Put differently, this was another kind of sociality that was also working with the local skills, resources, and ecological systems: urban commoning.

The concept of urban commoning as I will develop it is not the same as the concept of social capital. Indeed, it is a retort against the theory of value that social capital is premised upon and advances. Contrary to social capital theory, the concept of urban commoning intends to describe modes of sociality that offer alternatives to the production and realization of surplus value, modalities that I insist over-determine the current situation of neoliberal planetary urbanization. I propose that in order to combat the widespread commodification and privatization of the urban commons we need a clear understanding of how the urban common(s) acquires value and then, from here, we are in a better position to realistically examine where and how other options for urbanization might be brought into operation.

**Neoliberal Planetary Urbanization**

Accompanying changes to the social and economic landscapes of shrinking cities are material changes to the urban form and fabric. This is not only because real estate values fall, the tax base emptied out, and both public and private investment drops; it also signifies a new kind of urbanization that does not revolve around the production and realization of surplus value. This is a slow, destabilizing, green, empty, quiet, and part-time urbanization process. It produces a pockmarked urbanscape that punctures the boundary between urban and rural forms. It is an urbanscape of differentiating scales and temporalities, staggering between spatial clusters and open spaces, with its expanding wilderness swaying alongside and throughout the built environment. This process of urbanization, characteristic of many old industrial epicenters of the West, is also a feature of the recent urbanization of foreclosure. Both conditions have interrupted the dominant urban process of producing and realizing surplus.
In *Capital* Marx explains value is created through the production and exchange of commodities (today these include assets, products, and services). Value, he explains, is quantitative and qualitative; it can be measured, such as in an amount of money; and it is socially expressed through the system of exchange, such as through the trading process when commodities are compared and contrasted with each other.

How useful a commodity is or how much it satisfies a need is what Marx referred to as a commodity’s use-value. The material form of a commodity – its use-value created by human labor – can be immediately ascertained by studying how much of a human need it satisfies. Surplus value inheres in a commodity but is not realized until the commodity is traded, at which point the human labor embodied in the commodity is abstracted. He reiterates: ‘It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility’ (Marx, 1990 [1867]: 166). The labor and resources expended in the production of a commodity create a surplus value that inheres in the commodity. However, surplus value is only immanent to the commodity (assets, products, services) until it is actualized through the social practice of exchange – when the commodity is exchanged and realized as profit, income, or price. Regardless of whether we are speaking of urban shrinkage or expansion, the production and realization of value predominates.

Harvey succinctly explains: ‘capitalism is perpetually producing the surplus product that urbanization requires. The reverse relation also holds. Capitalism needs urbanization to absorb the surplus products it perpetually produces’ (Harvey, 2012: 5). Together value production and realization constitute the asymmetrical processes of urbanization, extracting surpluses ‘from somewhere and from somebody, while control over the use of the surplus typically lies in the hands of the few’ (2012: 5). Finance, investment, and speculative markets drive the urbanization process by presuming a growing rate of profit; all are premised upon the notion that urbanization will in turn facilitate the rate of profit to grow.

The entanglement of global capital and urbanization constitutes the current phenomenon of neoliberal planetary urbanization. In 1970 Henri Lefebvre predicted our current situation of planetary urbanization, announcing at the outset of *The Urban Revolution*: ‘Society has been completely urbanized... An urban society is a society that results from a process of complete urbanization. This urbanization is virtual today, but will become real in the future’ (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 1; emphasis in original). Later he announces to the reader that the ‘concept of the city no longer corresponds to a social object’, clarifying that ‘urban reality today looks more like chaos and disorder... than an object’ (2003 [1970]: 57). More recently, others have begun contesting the usefulness of the concept of the city. Architect Andrea Kahn has claimed that the ‘city’ as an isolated unit of assessment or a bounded entity is today defunct for
the ‘urban site is scaled through a set of dynamic functions created by fluid interactions between many differentially extensive processes’ (Kahn, 2005: 286). Similarly, Andy Merrifield poignantly describes a move ‘away from the notion of a city toward the urban’ (Merrifield, 2013: 912). And Neil Brenner asserts: ‘the urban can no longer be understood as a particular kind of place – that is, as a discreet, distinctive, and relatively bounded type of settlement’ (Brenner, 2013: 91).

Ultimately, planetary urbanization is a social relation that organizes everyday life (Brenner, 2013; Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Merrifield, 2013). Adding neoliberal to the concept of planetary urbanization is merely an attempt to historically situate the contemporary process of planetary urbanization and fend off the urge to naturalize this situation. For Harvey, neoliberalism has given rise to a new ‘kind of state apparatus’, which he aptly calls the ‘neoliberal state’ (Harvey, 2005: 7). The freedoms embodied in the neoliberal state ‘reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital’ (2005: 7). In other words, the state apparatus serves private interests ahead of the public good. Increasingly, urban change is managed through public/private partnerships whereby government entities and the corporate sector work together to distribute the costs and benefits of the urban commons. This is carried out largely through policy, zoning, property markets, speculative investment and finance, and development projects. One clear example of this would be the insidiously institutionalized system of theft otherwise referred to as accumulation by dispossession taking place in a ‘state-finance-nexus’ (Harvey, 2010: 204–5). The state-finance-nexus refers to the complicity between state actors and capitalist class power, whereby the institutions of government advance capital accumulation and the legal system protects and promotes this situation. Thus, the concept of neoliberal planetary urbanization concomitantly refers to the Herculean nature of global capital accumulation and the process of urbanization integral to it, all the while keeping the transformative politics immanent to the concept open, to pose the possibility of an urban society yet to come.

As exchange value is established as a social norm, urban life is captured by capital. Merrifield has his finger on the pulse when he notes:

Never before – even more than in Lefebvre’s day – has the urban process been so bound up with finance capital and with the caprices of the world’s financial markets. The global urbanization boom, with its seemingly insatiable flows into the secondary circuit of capital, has depended on the creation of new mechanisms to wheel and deal fictitious capital and credit money, on new deregulated devices for legalized looting and finagling, for asset stripping and absorbing surplus capital into the built environment. (Merrifield, 2013: 914)
Urban shrinkage is symptomatic of the ‘homogeneity and fragmentation’ of uneven global development (Harvey, 2006; Merrifield, 2013: 914).

For instance, it is worthwhile pointing out that urban shrinkage and expansion are two sides of the same coin. Deindustrialization and the trend to outsource labor resulted in the urban landscape of the Global South undergoing dramatic changes. Attracted to the economic opportunities that urban areas offer, cities in the Global South have experienced rapid population growth. The ‘world’s urban labor force’, Mike Davis notes, ‘has more than doubled since 1980’ (Davis, 2006: 3). It is no coincidence that statistics Davis cites neatly overlap with a time in human history when neoliberal doctrine has been in full swing. Unable to keep up with the demand for residential land and infrastructure development, it comes as no surprise that urban expansion in the Global South has resulted in the growth of vast tracts of shantytowns characterized by poor infrastructure (electricity, water, trash collection, toilets, education, and medical services) and substandard crowded housing (Davis, 2006; Neuwirth, 2006; Angel, 2012). And whilst there are many differences between the physical conditions of informal housing and urban shrinkage, there are several characteristics they share in common. The populations of both experience extreme poverty, impediments to accessing the urban advantage, and social stigma. Even the vacated landscapes of foreclosure have their fair share of substandard housing and infrastructure challenges.

**Predatory Purchasing**

Regardless of whether we are speaking of urban slums or the feral and foreclosed landscape of urban shrinkage, value re-enters the equation through the back door of speculative property investment. As the rate of profit for properties declines, because the surplus value of the property has not been realized or has depreciated when properties become distressed, and land is viewed as unproductive, speculative investment in the distressed properties and available land is based upon the assumption that future appreciation in property values and/or rental income will be realized.

When surplus exists but is not realized, private investment drops. That is unless a different way of realizing value re-enters the equation. One way this is done is when social relations become the basis for producing and realizing value. Social capital, as Sheila Foster proposes, creates an urban commons through which the bonds of neighborliness, community activities and revitalization projects, and networks of trust return and turn around the blight associated with ‘unproductive’ land. Collaborative structures managing shared resources (community gardens, community urban farms, or neighborhood watch programs) are strategies communities use to re-invest in their distressed neighborhoods.
This can positively impact the social and economic fabric of a community. Community gardens are one example of a collaborative management structure that relies upon social capital for its success. The positive influence social capital has on the ‘most disadvantaged neighborhoods’ includes ‘increasing rates of home-ownership and reductions in poverty’ (Foster, 2006: 545).

For Foster social capital is a common resource that sustains community wellbeing and protects environmental quality (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000). It can help in lowering crime rates and positively impact the quality of neighborhood life, helping to turn around poor real estate values. Hence, it can also lower the risks associated with investing in overgrown and available properties. Unsurprisingly then, the idea of social capital as it relates to improved property values has reappeared as part of the solution to the foreclosure crisis, releasing the forces of speculative property investment that led to the subprime mortgage crisis in the first instance.

The real estate crisis of 2007–12 in the US has resulted in a resurgence of speculative investment, this time not for the development of suburban housing tracts, shopping centers, resorts, industrial complexes, or malls. Rather, investors have seen the vacated landscape of urban shrinkage as a good business opportunity and have begun buying up foreclosed properties.

To most people, a foreclosure is a bad thing. To a real estate investor, it can be a goldmine. Sure, nobody wants to see anyone lose their home. And unfortunately you or I aren’t in the position to forgive the loans of defaulting homeowners. However, with some practice and lots of know-how, you can learn how to help the homeowner make the best of a bad situation – while earning yourself a nice reward in the process. (Dempsey and Beitler, 2005: xix)

The real estate crisis has also increased demand for rental properties, providing additional incentives for predatory purchasers. In 2010 the apartment research firm Axiometrics reported that 2010 was the best year on record for landlords and rent prices in 15 years, with rents rising 4.2 percent for 2010 (Wong, 2011). Europeans fared better than their renting counterparts in the US given that rent controls in some countries can provide renters with a solid safety net (France, Austria, Sweden, to name a few). Alas, with the financial crisis countries such as Portugal began proposing severe social reforms, one of which is the elimination of rent controls.

In the US even the public housing market is being privatized. From 2003 to 2005 in Antioch, California, Section 8 households increased approximately 50 percent (Moore, 2008). One of the main reasons for this sort of statistic is that under the Section 8 Federal Housing Voucher
Program (1983) low-income people are being forced out of federal housing projects in downtown areas and provided with incentives (rental vouchers) to enter middle-income housing on the private market. With the foreclosure crisis in full swing, this has resulted in many federally-assisted tenants relocating to the new lower rents on offer in the distressed and foreclosed landscapes of suburbia.

The 2010 Brookings Institute State of Metropolitan America report noted that with ‘bright flight’ urban centers are becoming whiter, as the educated younger population wants to enjoy a shorter commute and the lifestyle of downtown living (Berube et al., 2010). Meanwhile, the larger metropolitan area of the suburbs is becoming more diverse, with the majority of African American and Hispanic populations now living in suburbia. Hence, on the one hand, the suburbs might be emptying out as a result of the economic meltdown, but what was once a racially and economically homogeneous landscape is turning into an affordable housing option for others. The single-family housing typology is changing as cheap suburban rentals offer options for multi-family housing. The hope is that with this trend, suburbia could very well become denser and the demographic could permanently shift away from the white nuclear family model to include different kinds of household types, ethnicities, and racial groups (see Larco, 2009).

Yet the social differentiation of suburbia is not necessarily economically redistributive. In the absence of new infrastructure, especially social services and a strong public transportation network, the new suburban poor might diversify the demography of the suburban landscape, but they remain economically vulnerable. The risk is that they will be trapped in a poverty cycle on the urban fringes where few employment opportunities exist. If residents can’t afford increasing gasoline prices, or worse still an automobile, their geographical paralysis might quite simply render them invisible. This kind of socioeconomic isolation could be far worse than living in the downtown destitute areas they left behind. The point being, viewing the diversification of suburbia as the solution to the foreclosure crisis merely displaces the deeper problem of surplus realization as it relates to inequity and urbanization and the power relations in which these are ensnared. The same can be said for the privatization of vacated downtown areas. Privatization of tax-delinquent land might re-mobilize the devalued surplus of vacancy and produce a new space for capital accumulation and circulation but it fails to critically address the speculative dimension of surplus value. One important lesson from Marx’s theory of value is that value cannot be simply translated as profit, because the surplus value contained within a commodity is not always realized as profit – sometimes it is devalued. Therefore surplus value is necessarily speculative.

Foster, in her study of communities transforming abandoned land the city owns into a common resource – social capital – that was being
threatened to be sold off to private developers, highlights the ways in which private markets and speculative forces carry more influence on land-use decisions in the US than do community organizations and ‘public deliberative processes that considers the larger social, economic, or environmental’ issues (2006: 546). She is clearly contesting the neo-liberal logic of trying to attract private investment as the solution to urban shrinkage. Her study mounts a formidable case in favor of revising law and policy so as to better account for a community’s social capital by recognizing the ‘inherently public nature’ of land used by a community to promote public wellbeing (2006: 574). She argues law and policy include within its scope a revised definition of property rights, one that recognizes a ‘limited type of property interest’ (2006: 573) that rests upon the creation of common resources – improved social capital, lower crime rates, and environmental wellbeing. Her solution is helpful and is certainly a step in the right direction. Unfortunately the ‘social capital’ generated by the community gardens also attracts the interest of predatory investors.

Community urban agriculture in downtown Detroit caught the attention of millionaire financier John Hantz, who in consultation with the Kellogg Foundation saw a tremendous business opportunity in turning vacant city-owned downtown lots into ‘the world’s largest farm’ – Hantz Woodlands. The aim is clear: create land scarcity where there currently is none and drive up its value along with producing food for the market. Hantz intends to invest $30 million of his own cash to beautify the downtown fields of Detroit with orchards and develop for-profit farms, maximizing the productivity of the small plots with the latest in green technologies (compost-heated greenhouses and hydroponic growing systems). In order to realize his vision, Hantz requested that the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation give him tax-delinquent land in addition to the land he purchases (at below market rate). In this instance, the value of the land does not equate with its price. This roused the concerns of Detroit’s community agricultural sector, who understandably viewed the proposition to commercialize Detroit’s urban agriculture as a mask for a massive land grab (Pardo, 2012).

Foster’s study of the legal frameworks used to impose the law of private property and profit upon abandoned private property that has been used by a community for public benefit speaks directly to the pitfalls of the ‘state-finance-nexus’ that Harvey alerts us to. The irony is that by selling off the land to Hantz Woodlands the City implicitly acknowledges available land can be successfully put to alternative uses, ones that do not rely upon large-scale privatized development and the production of food for the free market. In defense of its decision to sell off a large portion of Detroit’s east side to Hantz Woodlands, the City claimed it could no longer afford to maintain the vacant lots or the loss in tax revenues. But there are other ways the City could have responded.
Garrett Hardin’s influential essay ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (Hardin, 1968) describes a scenario where shared resources are depleted because of over-use. Basically his thesis is that individuals do not act in the interests of the collective but out of self-interest and in isolation to each other. The commons dilemma arises because the use or abuse of the commons by one individual or group negatively impacts the ability of another individual or group, who has a shared claim in the resource to use it. The dilemma creates a political problem because, if left unregulated, individual stakeholders will over-use and deplete the commons; this, along with their competing claims over a shared resource, can lead to conflict.

Since the publication of Hardin’s essay theories and practices devoted to the protection, maintenance, and management of the world’s commons have begun to gain traction. In particular studies on the commons were pushed into public prominence in 2009 when political scientist Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Laureate in Economics for her groundbreaking work on the management of common-pool resources (a natural or human-made resource where it is difficult to exclude another person from using the resource and where one person’s use of the resource diminishes another’s use). Her research rebuffed popular belief that people cannot work together to sustainably and peacefully manage resources they hold in common and that management of the commons is best left to government or big business. Ostrom’s experiments on the different ways people act based on variable incentives led to the important conclusion that individuals are capable of collaborating and developing reasonable rules and systems of self-governance that can efficiently, sustainably, and equitably manage resources they share and depend upon. The key to success is the creation of institutions that facilitate and incentivize cooperation amongst different stakeholders so that they collectively manage common pool resources for their mutual benefit. The problem of free-riders that Hardin drew attention to can be overcome by simply improving the lines of communication amongst people and if community members, not an official external to the community, monitor each other’s use of the resource in question. Ostrom identified trust and successful communication between stakeholders as two primary conditions of a common property institution that leads to successful and equitable outcomes (Ostrom, 1990) and it is these principles that are at the core of Cuba’s experiments in urban farming and alternative land-use policies.

Urban farming and land-use policies in Cuba have supported grassroots labor and the use-value of land for the production and equitable distribution of food. In this regard, they offer a helpful framework for developing alternatives to neoliberal practices. Cuba combines the autonomous activities of communities with a heteronomous model of institutional support. The country has successfully supported community
urban agricultural activities by connecting the coherency arising from a centralized system of management and strong policies with the decentralized activities of urban agricultural representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture working with communities and individuals.

After the fall of the Soviet Union (1989) and the subsequent termination of the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), which Cuba had been a member of since 1972, the country was confronted with a food crisis. All of a sudden petrochemical-based fertilizers and pesticides, along with agricultural machinery, were in short supply. Not to forget the partial blockade against Cuba at the time and the imminent threat of a complete blockade adding to Cuban anxieties over food supplies. They responded by instituting a system of organic urban agriculture called organoponico that, as economist Sinan Koont’s extensive research on Cuban urban agriculture shows, has since gone on to ‘become one of the mainstays of vegetable cultivation in Cuban urban agriculture’ (Koont, 2009). The organoponicos creatively blend food autonomy, land-use, and economic policies with small-scale community-driven agricultural activities, alleviating Cuba’s dependence on petrochemical-based agricultural chemicals in addition to providing healthy, affordable food. This is because small-scale farming initiatives do not require large machinery, and producing food close to densely populated areas minimizes transportation costs. Koont reports over 350,000 new jobs have been created, and with the total workforce of Cuba reportedly at 4.8 million in 2005, urban agriculture ‘makes a significant contribution to the country’s total employment’ (2009). Over time, yields have significantly increased from 1.5 kg per square meter in 1994 to 25.8 kg in 2001 (2009).

Cuba’s model of community urban agriculture as integral to government policy has influenced Venezuela’s Agro Ciudad movement. Since 2009 Agro Ciudad has transformed over 26 million square feet of available urban land to agriculture (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 2012). Venezuela developed its urban agricultural program as part of that country’s roadmap to food sovereignty. Food sovereignty as defined by Via Campesina is ‘the ability of each state to define its own agricultural and food policies, according to the goals of sustainable development and food security’ (cited in Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 2012: 1). The oil crises of 2002 and 2003 and the global food crisis of 2009 directly posed a threat to Venezuela’s food supply. The government responded by diversifying its agricultural economy with a view to enhancing ‘human wellbeing, the environment and culture’ through family or collective agricultural activities. They emphasized ‘endogenous development’ – development from within communities and based on local skills and resources. Food is produced in schools, universities, by cooperatives, neighborhoods, and families. It is sold at local markets, and as intermediaries are cut out of the equation the price
of food is lowered. From 2009 urban food production in Venezuela grew from 457 tons to 6,340 tons in May 2012 (Embassy, 2012).

The collaborations described above generate an alternative value to the law of value that subsumes all social relations under the umbrella of capital accumulation and surplus value. They are therefore successful precedents in urban commoning. This brings the discussion full circle. How might an alternative value to that of surplus value be generated? Can this provide the basis for a different kind of urbanization process, one that is not already co-opted by the form of value? I think the answer to these questions could lie with processes of urban commoning. The development of the value form of the urban commons that community activities like farming yield raises the thorny issue of how the urban commons has come to be exploited and appropriated and, in turn, how this reconstitutes the common as non-common. This problem requires commons scholarship shift from a study of decentralized systems of management with specific policy implications onto a deeper philosophical problem concerning the manner in which the commons is being re-constructed as an untapped market opportunity with a view to resuscitating the relative autonomy of commoning as a practice that ruptures the machinations of capital accumulation and circulation from inside, all the while presenting an unmediated outside to it. This is exactly what the Venezuelan and Cuban experiments in community agriculture achieve.

The strength of the Cuban and Venezuelan examples of organic urban agriculture comes from how government policies were harnessed to support collaborations between people, land, and ecological systems—training, marketing, local markets—such that the autonomous activities of the community pervade the institutional arrangements they work in. Instead of simply being an apparatus that captures these energies and places them in the service of capital accumulation, as the governing authority of Detroit has done, the Cubans have developed a more collaborative model, one that challenges the large-scale corporate system of monoculture and the privatization of land and land use. Concomitantly, the Cuban situation presents us with a glimmer of hope as it successfully produces food for people, not the global market (cash crops, speculation, fluctuating prices, and for-profit biofuel crops). As the Venezuelan government stated: it ‘has a social vision of the food sector: food is not merchandise, but rather, a fundamental human right’ (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 2012). Integral to both the Cuban and Venezuelan projects are practices of urban commoning.

Urban Commoning

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri share with Ostrom a suspicion toward Keynesian or social democratic ideals of regulation and reform, as well as
the regimes of private property and law in operation throughout capita-
list society. Unlike Ostrom, their concept of the common is not that of
pre-given commons; rather, the common is socially produced through
desires, well-being, cooperation, and generosity.

By ‘the common’ we mean, first of all, the common wealth of the
material world – the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all
nature’s bounty… We consider the common also and more signifi-
cantly those results of social production that are necessary for social
interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages,
codes, information, affects, and so forth. (Hardt and Negri,
2009: viii)

For them, the common is a social relation internal to capital; it is both a
relation that capital produces and one that the political endeavors of the
multitude bring into existence in their struggle against contemporary
regimes of power.

Hardt and Negri have observed that with post-Fordism the produc-
tion process moved from a quantitative system of material production to
a qualitative system of immaterial production that involved the repro-
duction of information, communication, knowledge, and affects (emo-
tions, excitement, joy). They go on to argue the common arises from
social immaterial production; it is not given in the way that Hardin’s
commons dilemma posits, which the institution of private property
promises to solve. By substituting ‘the common’ in place of ‘the com-
mons’, they interrupt the collective versus individualistic paradigm
informing a great body of scholarship devoted to the study of the com-
mons that presupposes the collective spaces of the commons were priva-
tized by the institution of private property. This is because the common
as they define it is neither public nor private, it neither comes under the
control of the state nor is it reduced to the atomized world of individual
property rights. 5

Hardt and Negri push the discussion of the commons out of the dual-
istic framework of public versus private onto a productivist terrain that
recognizes the common as the effect of sharing and cooperation and the
inclusive logic that inheres within any given instance of the common
(Hardt and Negri, 2009). They are careful to point out that the imma-
nence of the common is not grounded in ‘any faith in the immediate or
spontaneous capacities of society. The social plane of immanence has to
be organized politically’ (2009: 15–16).

Urban areas are one of the primary sites of common production. Cities
are, as Hardt and Negri say, ‘to the multitude what the factory was to the
industrial working class’ (2009: 250; emphasis in original). They are
the product of everybody who lives, works, and visits there. And just
as the factory was once a site invested with capitalist relations of
production and also a site of resistance for labor, Hardt and Negri argue, today it is the metropolis that produces both the conditions of exploitation and political resistance. If the city is the factory through which both capital and the common are produced, then the antagonistic relationship the common poses for capital appears to be less a question of recognizing and organizing the common, as Hardt and Negri contend, than it is one of activating it, or what might otherwise be called commoning – reclaiming the commons from the process of capital accumulation. Perhaps the productivist focus of their analysis – the city as a factory – needs to be expanded to include a consideration of how urbanization realizes surplus value and, in turn, how this extends beyond the finite boundaries of individual cities to encompass a global process of neoliberal planetary urbanization. The second part of this equation is helpful when we try to assess the political potential of acts of urban commoning.

Urban commoning produces positions of relative autonomy to the heteronomous machinations of capital by creating alternatives to surplus value that directly engage with how surplus is realized as profit. It also generates a locus of general social value through which other social actors can collaborate in their struggles against the value form of capital accumulation. Detroit’s community urban gardening programs produce an alternative to the law of value as realized through exchange and the generation of profit.

The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, for instance, was involved in researching equitable access to healthy food and employment opportunities, work that later formed the basis for the existing Detroit Food Policy Council. This kind of initiative has transformative aims: to create an autonomous food system, one that challenges the corporate model of industrialized monoagriculture operating on a large scale for the global market. It builds coalitions with governmental and community leaders, changing the power relations endemic to the law of value. The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network links the struggles of population shrinkage and available land to other struggles over unemployment, outdated skill sets, crime, drugs, food deserts, and hunger. The common produced through these instances of commoning is also ideological in that it successfully exposes the materiality of poverty and urban blight that the commodity form of labor conceals from view.

Urban commoning creates situations of radical alterity from within the privatized landscape of neoliberal planetary urbanization. It mediates between the natural common of ecological growth, food production, and the artificial common of innovative ideas and collective practices, distributing the benefits, resources, and opportunities that arise from the urban common in support of collective well-being. Simply put, the community farms feed the hungry, support drug rehabilitation programs, maintain available land, provide training and job opportunities, and
more importantly they provide tangible collective responses to the scar-
cities arising in tandem with urban shrinkage. In contrast, the speculative
land practices of Hantz Woodlands are premised upon creating scarcity
for future gains.

**Conclusion**

The responses to urban shrinkage described above highlight a struggle
that is ensuing between processes of *commoning* and neoliberal planetary
urbanization. The foreclosed and feral landscapes of urban shrinkage
transform the rule of property, privatization, and individualism under-
girding neoliberal urbanscapes. However, the forces of capitalism pick up
the loose threads of the fraying exterior, weaving these common spaces
and times back into the interior fabric of planetary urbanization and
global capital by subsuming them under the law of value. In this way
the common is continually being rendered non-common and it is here
where the modality of urban commoning struggles to reclaim the
common. In this context commoning announces a shared situation; it
is an autonomous political movement. It disrupts the dominant political
form that represents the political in terms of a neat contradiction
between rational/irrational, order/chaos, state/people, capitalist/worker
– a representation that in turn renders the transformative goals of polit-
cical activity manageable.

Urban commoning refers to three processes working in tandem. The
first is a political project that seeks to construct coalitions between indi-
vidual, local, regional, national, and even international struggles so as to
provide the groundwork for an expansive and wide-ranging politics to
form – a politics that aspires to bring about a change in oppressive
relations of power. The second is an urbanization process that constructs
alternatives to the production and realization of surplus value. The third
is collaborative activities involved in concretely transforming the system
of exclusive ownership that renders the common non-common. When
taken together, these three aspects of urban commoning strive for
human emancipation and environmental well-being. Urban commoning
contravenes the law of value so that exchange value no longer predom-
inates over the land; rather, use-value pervades the land and thereby
creates a ‘new land’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 161).

The struggle of urban commoning is less concerned with finding
common ground or the Marxist imperative of organizing the oppressed
against their oppressors than it is with staging experiments with and
presenting alternatives to the law of surplus value driving neoliberal
planetary urbanization. Commoning actualizes that shared time of futur-
ity so as to open up the present to the difference that inheres within it.
Without this admittedly utopian form of the urban commoning experi-
ment, there is little hope that urban life can and will change.
Notes

1. The architecture of Detroit spoke volumes to the city’s prosperous past. Detroit has some incredible examples of Art Deco skyscrapers such as the Book-Cadillac Hotel (1924) designed by Louis Kamper, along with several magnificent leftovers from the 1880s Gilded Age architects, such as Harry J. Rill and Gordon Lloyd, not to forget wonderful examples of American neoclassical architecture like the Cadillac Place (1923) designed by Albert Kahn for General Motors.

2. Pittsburgh is an example of one old industrial center adapting to the changing economic landscape of neoliberal doctrine. When its steel industry collapsed in the 1980s, the city diversified its economy to include the energy, finance, and health industries, along with proactively recruiting young people to the city by revitalizing the livability of the downtown.

3. Pierre Bourdieu is typically associated with having inaugurated the concept of social capital, positing a circular argument that describes how the powerful and privileged secure their power through the social networks they have with other powerful and privileged individuals (Bourdieu, 1986). James Coleman picks up on Bourdieu’s project, expanding the concept of social capital to include social relations that provide non-elite actors with resources that can counterbalance the inequities they encounter and endure. Coleman’s focus on social capital arising from neighborhood groups and kinship ties has a distinctively conservative and traditionalist ring to it (Coleman, 1988). Similarly, Robert Putnam laments over what he perceives to be a deficit of civic engagement in contemporary life. The reason he provides is the demise of social capital. The solution, he says, comes from revitalizing social networks, norms, relations of trust, and cooperation amongst individuals pursuing shared objectives (Putnam, 1993, 1995). All social capital theorists maintain a social network is productive of capital.

4. Ostrom shared the Nobel Prize with Oliver Williamson.

5. Public space is an area that can be openly accessed by any person regardless of their race, gender, class, and/or ethnicity. Public space is a bounded area largely defined in opposition to private property. A public space is also one where civic life takes place, in the sense that it facilitates the processes of participatory democracy whereby people express their opinions publicly and communicate concerns they share in common. That said, the systems of securitization interwoven throughout public space may not restrict access to public areas, but they do discipline civic life through mechanisms of surveillance and other socially coercive mechanisms such as the norms of ‘civil’ conduct that often exclude non-normative forms of behavior, such as the hostility LGBTQ youth, the homeless, and street vendors encounter in public space. What this means is that the form and content of public space is restricted.

References


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