

Response to the Urban Convivial

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The three presentations confront important questions relating to the forging of convivial spaces. They examine issues related to (1) political agency; (2) rupture with alienated production, a diagnosis with distinct etiologies, from the different presenters; (3) scale of analysis; (4) resolutions of impasses, or overcoming of obstacles, as they relate to reaching convivial destinations.

One: Edward Huijsbens's presentation

On Let me start with strengths. The merits of Huijsbens's presentation undoubtedly lie in the revival of Illich, the aspiration to convivial urban spaces, and warning of the dangers involved in various forces, particularly those aligned with power, to take over the process of green growth, opening a new frontier of accumulation, and the non-neutrality of technology overall, including spatial planning.

My critiques are three-fold. One relates to scale of analysis. Urbanization is taken as a given, or the output of a spatial fix related to crises of over-accumulation. Likewise, smart city grids and their associated pathologies are criticized from the perspective of an implied future alternative conviviality. Yet, certain questions remain un-explored when we draw these types of borders around the object of inquiry (the planetary urbanization thesis doesn't accept such borders). Urbanization in its current form is not merely a type of financialized spatial planning but the child of human population shifts. Particularly, hyper-urbanization is related to the great processes of land concentration and industrialization and subsequently neo-liberalization of Third World agriculture. By naturalizing those population shifts we risk foreclosing certain diagnostics and in turn, certain solutions. Even on the terms of urban conviviality, we risk giving short-shrift to considering the possibility of Third World agrarian reforms, leading to a more decentralized rural-linked urban fabric, with a polycentric conviviality.

Second, related to scale of analysis. We need to trace the social/geographic origins of the labor and resources which make smart phones, and the global consequences of specific patterns of energy-intensive industrialization. For example: Where do phones come from? Which labor forces make them? By what mechanisms – especially massive Third World labor semi-proletarianized labor forces, the output of failed, reversed, or prevented agrarian reforms – are they kept cheap? How are mineral inputs kept cheap? And what are the consequences of the energy-intensive model of development implied, particularly as it relates to the enclosure of atmospheric space for waste – CO2?

This question of scale also touches on the question of political agency. Borrowing from Hardt-Negri, Huijsbens uses the idea of multitude. But are the multitudes involved, say, in smartphone production in China, rare earth processing in Malaysia, lithium extraction in Bolivia, and the reserve army of labor in the periphery overall, inserted in the same way into the global law of value

as urban service workers? That is, if we envision a multitude, or international, that binds those people together, do we need to first identify the different structural locations they inhabit and which could force them into short-term conflict or contradiction? Furthermore, how does the US state interact with Third World political forces which re-assert sovereignty over natural resources or which have, historically, attempted to shift the terms of trade? Does that, then, imply specific political tasks in urban cores when it comes to arriving at shared convivial horizons planet-wide?

Finally, if we do not adopt a structural-materialist analytic related to agency and political strategy, what is the alternative? Does the art of living together provide a sufficiently robust alternative for thinking through how everyone can have convivial urban-rural lives? E.g. Brazilian soy plantations that are linked to US mega-food processors selling to US consumers with a great deal of purchasing power may have a different notion of living together than can possibly be conceived by the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil and the Homeless Workers Movement. How can conviviality be imagined so as to include all who deserve a convivial alternative modernity?

Two: On Brandon Hunter's Presentation:

The strength clearly lies in taking a union-centered approach; rigorously thinking through questions of labor internationalism; attending to contradictions within the working class and union sectors; putting forth strong organizational-strategic proposals for how to improve the lives of people in the South; rupturing with Eurocentric notions of the end of work; and perhaps most importantly pointing out there is a possible future where mass amounts of labor go into environmental remediation and border control, leading to improved environmental outcomes but also taking the form of what I've been calling "fortress eco-nationalism."

My main critiques center on, first, scale of analysis; and second, specification of the social layers involved in producing antagonism and contradiction.

To begin with scale. It seems to me that the focus on unions risks an economic perspective. What I mean is, the focus on US-Canadian unions on the one hand and Mexican unions on the other in contending with seaweed does not confront the origins of the seaweed problem, on lines similar to what I adumbrated above. We need to ask, what are the social relations which produce the seaweed problem to begin with? What is its political ecology? Again, it is not natural that seaweed comes to Mexico. It is the fruit, as Hunter notes, of Brazilian soy plantation and warming seas. But are those natural features of the social-ecological topography? Soy exports are linked on the one hand, to semi-feudal Brazilian agribusiness and Brazilian land concentration, US food monopolies, and a US "way of life" (constructed by capitalism and the corporate capture of US food chains) for which soy is a major input. Thus, unionism needs to look not just North, but also South, to agrarian reform in Brazil. Furthermore, deforestation of the Amazon is a driver of the oceanic warming which produces the seaweed. In that sense, we need to embrace a larger scale in order to focus on the sources of the pathology.

We might extend this further, and point out that under Lula, deforestation for soy and cattle plantations slowed down enormously, and ramped up again under Bolsonaro. He, in turn, rose to power after a US-backed coup d'état against the Worker's Party. So when we think about internationalism, and what Hunter elsewhere calls the "hemming in" of countries, don't we need

to identify the political forces that do such hemming-in? And doesn't this demand we break with a sectoral and economistic focus on unions, and bring the larger political field into view? Similarly, the question of labor nationalism needs sharper specification: labor internationalism cannot merely be thought of in terms of sectoral demands. We know that historically the AFL-CIO has been an instrument of US foreign policy, including supporting coups in Latin America. Does not that facet of labor internationalism also need to be addressed?

Second, specification. Hunter uses terms like "elite-driven" and the interests of a "rarified elite." I think it is more productive to directly name the capitalist system as the social organization of production, accumulation, and consumption which produces a ruling class, rather than the looser formulation of "elite."

3) On Dan Kelly's presentation:

The strength of this presentation lies in thinking through how to get people to engage in collective action towards the production of socially-useful goods, or use values, under capitalist conditions, in this case, community gardening, which has numerous ancillary benefits for human societies. It takes that as an example of convivial production. This is wholly convincing.

I have two main critiques. One relates to the specification of the food system; and the other relates to the implied model of transition. Let me take them in turn.

On the food-systems model. Kelly posits how our industrial food system has colonial capitalist roots, and with human and non-human costs, based on a systematic model of extraction, and it is entangled with the past. Although I broadly agree with the thrust of this diagnosis, I think it may be unnecessarily chaotic. Let me explain. It seems to me that there is no industry without extraction. There is probably agriculture without extraction, potentially at least, if we understand by extraction as the use of minerals and abiotic material in the production of use values, which concomitantly produces waste. In this sense non-industrialized agriculture can also lead to immense environmental damage via erosion, deforestation, etcetera, particularly via capitalist over-production. So for housekeeping purposes we should make sure to keep those things separate. Finally, Kelly describes the current system as "modernity" (whereas I would use the word capitalist). I think it's worth holding onto the value of modernity, meaning, I think, the rise of potentially universal forms of knowledge, on the epistemic plain, braided with systemic social-interdependence on the material plain.

I raise these last points not to be scholarly, but because they raise critical questions of transition, in particular in helping us identify the system we live in, and how that conditions struggles to move beyond it.

Colonialism, here, is not clarified enough in that colonialism denied and denies the political sovereignty to create alternative futures through denying political sovereignty (at least for some). It also meant the transfer of value from South to North, which is why so few people are involved in food production in New Zealand. The food system is broadly neo-colonial in the present in that some countries effectively lack capacity to decide what is produced in their borders. This leads to

over-production of out-of-season fruits and vegetables, which can then make it almost impossible for global North farmers to find it rational to produce such goods, except with volunteer labor. Can we imagine a convivial transition that does not take a hyper-protectionist nationalist form in the North without attending to the overall neo-colonial nature of the food system?

Transition to a convivial future, furthermore, necessarily implies transition from something. But what are we transitioning from? Here the nature of the current food system is specified as above. It is part and parcel of a broader neoliberal system, blighted with alienation, individualism, entitlement, which is part of the system of industrial colonial modernity. Transition to a different food system is part of a transition to, in Kelly's words, a "mosaic of alternatives which the pluriverse demands," a system marked by fluidity.

Now, I am in favor of polycentric worlds, democratically planned, which I understand for purposes as potentially analogous to the alternatives the paper discusses. But does this conception help us consider questions of transition, of getting from here to there, or what in a different tradition was posed as the problem of socialist construction? To embrace difference I agree with, but can we sidestep what structural forces in the world prevent difference? And if we want conviviality based on joy, don't we need to clearly specify the forces proposing the universalization of joy? And don't we need to consider how different places may face different obstacles? Can we really forego a materialist analysis in understanding where each of us are, and where we want to go?

The reason I think this is particularly important is because while the presentation is wonderful in discussing the granular or molecular organizing needed to emplace a different world, the political economy, or the material forces, or simply the capitalist class structures, which underpin the model are not given adequate attention, neither on a world-scale, as discussed above with neo-colonial fruit and vegetable production, or domestically in terms of prices for goods, and the kinds of labor available for gardening, and the overall social reproduction of laborers.

What, for example, are the volunteers doing when they are not gardening? Is the model scalable to the entirety of their daily calorie needs? How many people can Auckland feed via community gardens, and how to compensate people, or will it be volunteer, which suggests – although not stating outright – that they will be paid elsewhere for their labor? Does this then risk creating convivial oases surrounded by the desert of capitalist production? From this angle I think while we need not accept limiting our imagination to them, questions of broader society-wide and world-wide socialist transition are inescapable, minimally as a tradition with which to wrestle, when engaging with the move to a convivial future.