



The Violence of Sustainable Urbanity

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If Nature is an ideological construction that separates us from the environment, the contemporary search for technical solutions is only business as usual. How then can we face the environmental disasters that human consumption and pollution bring upon us? Erik Swyngedouw advocates for a politization of the environment around the idea of equality.

Anthropocenic Urbanity

In May 2013, the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere reached 400 parts per million, roughly equivalent to the atmospheric conditions during the era when dinosaurs roamed the earth. This fact signals nothing less than a social and ecological catastrophe that cannot easily be turned around, however hard we try. Planetary urbanization is generally recognized as a key driver of anthropogenic climate change and other socio-environmental transformations such as biodiversity loss, soil erosion, deforestation, pollution, and the galloping commodification of all manner of natures. The Anthropocene, the proposed name for the successor geological period of the Holocene, has now truly arrived, and planetary urbanization is its geographical form. Our urban fate and nature's transformation are irrevocably bound up in an intimate symbiosis characterized by extraordinarily uneven socio-ecological conditions.

This situation is now elevated to a matter of public concern: greenhouse gas emissions are directly related to the process of urbanization; the production of information technologies upon which contemporary urban economies rest is predicated on land and resource grabbing in some of the most vulnerable social ecologies of the world; the excesses and wastes of urbanization—from e-waste to CO₂—are customarily decanted onto the socio-ecological dumping grounds of cities' local and global peripheries; and “sustainable” eco-technological urban developments are often predicated on mobilizing precarious labor and dispossessing local people from their resources and livelihoods (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006).

The realization that a combined and uneven socio-ecological disintegration is accelerating has spurred a global urban intellectual and professional technocracy in search of an ecological urbanity that seeks out the eco-prophylactic qualities of the combination of eco-development, retrofitting, sustainable architecture, resilient urban governance, the commodification of environmental “services,” and innovative technological design. This techno-managerial disposition has now been consensually established as the frontier of architectural, planning, and design theory and practice, presumably capable of saving both city and planet, while assuring that civilization as we know it can continue for a while longer. Under the banner of radical techno-managerial restructuring, the focus is now squarely on how to sustain capitalist urbanity so that nothing really has to change.

Contested Natures

A strange paradox choreographs much of contemporary urban theory and practice: the elevation of environmental concerns to the status of global humanitarian cause and public concern functions as “a gigantic operation in the depoliticization of subjects” (Badiou 2008, p. 139). While, in the name of saving the planet, all manner of expertise, knowledge, technologies, and arguments are marshaled to perform their prophylactic qualities, the urban and environmental condition is increasingly characterized by depoliticizing modes of governance and increasingly repressive forms of bio-political control. I maintain that the elevation of the environmental condition to the status of universal global concern that requires urgent techno-managerial attention is based on a view of Nature¹ that deflects attention from the socio-ecological predicament we are actually in and solidifies the very dynamics and processes that produce radically uneven and unequal socio-ecological outcomes. Moreover, this view of Nature as a single *thing* amenable to techno-managerial action prevents the emergence of a more egalitarian-democratic view of the environment based in dispute and struggle over the production of the socio-ecological conditions we wish to inhabit. Both critical urban political theory and proliferating urban political insurgencies since 2011 contest this consensual, technocratic depoliticization of governance.

Depoliticized urban environments

Even the remotest places on earth carry the imprint of the planetary urbanization process. It is from the position of this deepening, but socially unequal, entanglement of the social and the natural that the urban environmental conundrum ought to be approached. Such perspective moves the gaze from thinking through a “politics” of the environment to “politicizing” the environment and extends the terrain of the political to domains hitherto left to the mechanics of nature. The nonhuman world becomes “enrolled” in a process of politicization, and that is precisely what needs to be fully endorsed. Yet in urban ecological thinking and practice, particular imaginaries of an external Nature, one that is out of sync and requires rebalancing, is still hegemonic.

Nature, according to Timothy Morton, acts as a kind of sponge term, signifying nothing but the meanings it soaks up, usually lists of terms like hurricanes, HIV, cats, water, biodiversity, etc. This is rarely acknowledged, and less so because Nature also has a law- or norm-like quality, becoming a yardstick against which deviations are measured. This norm-like quality also entails a third quality of Nature, which is a fantasy of the good and the just. All three simultaneously imply an attempt to fixate Nature’s unstable meaning while it is presented as an Other on which we focus our displaced deepest fears and longings. Of course, *any* attempt to fix the meaning of empty signifiers is political. The disavowal or the refusal to recognize the political character of such gestures, the attempts to universalize the situated and positioned meanings inscribed in Nature, lead to perverse forms of depoliticization, to placing Nature outside the political—that is, outside the field of public dispute, contestation, and disagreement (Žižek 2008).

Moreover, such symbolizations of Nature disavow the Real of natures—that is, the heterogeneous, unpredictable, occasionally catastrophic acting-out of socio-ecological processes. It is these un-symbolized natures that haunt us in their excessive acting: droughts, hurricanes, tsunamis, killer heat waves, roaming environmental refugees, oil spills, urban waste, recombinant DNA, earthquakes, globalizing diseases, and disintegrating polar ice are just a few markers of this. These “intrusions of the Real” assert that there is no singular, let alone inherently benign, Nature out there that needs or requires salvation in name of either Nature itself or a generic humanity. There is nothing foundational in nature that needs, demands, or requires sustaining. There is no Utopia to be discerned in the inner functioning of nature. The debate and controversies over Nature and what to do with it, in contrast, signal our political inability to engage in directly political and

¹ I shall use “Nature” to refer to the notion of an imagined universal nature; I shall use “nature” to refer to the kaleidoscopic diversity of things and processes that make up the physical world.

social arguments and strategies about rearranging the socio-ecological coordinates of everyday life, the production of new socio-natural configurations, the contingencies of material natures, and the arrangements of urban socio-metabolic organization that we inhabit.

The generic signifier that encapsulates recent post-political attempts to deal with Nature in its urban form is, of course, “sustainability.” Even more than the slippery and floating meanings of Nature, sustainability is the empty signifier *par excellence*. Its prophylactic qualities can only be suggested by adding specifying metaphors, illustrated by the proliferation of terms such as sustainable cities, planning, development, forestry, transport, regions, communities, architecture, loss, design, resource use, housing, growth, policy, and so on. The gesture to sustainability already guarantees that the matter of Nature and the environment is taken seriously, that those in charge take our fears seriously.

Sustainability or, more precisely, the quilting points around which its meaning is woven is the thing around which environmental urban policymakers’ and activists’ desire revolves, yet simultaneously stands in for the disavowed recognition that the world is really in a mess and really needs drastic and revolutionary action beyond the mobilization of techno-managerial fixes.

Politicizing environments: the violence of the sustainable city

As I have argued elsewhere (Swyngedouw 2009, 2011a, 2011b), consensually established concerns such as sustainability nurture a politically reactionary, “post-political” stance in which ideological or dissensual contestation is replaced by techno-managerial planning, expert management, and bio-political administration (Marquand 2004). This depoliticized consensual arrangement is organized through post-democratic institutions of governance that are increasingly replacing the political institutions of government (Crouch 2004) and are embedded in a geographically heterogeneous, but broadly naturalized neoliberal political-economic order.

The call made above to abandon Nature in no way suggests ignoring, let alone forgetting, the Real of natures or, more precisely, the diverse, multiple, whimsical, contingent, and often unpredictable socio-ecological relationships of which we are part; even less is it a call for ignoring the political and socio-ecologically uneven and power-laden configurations of the metabolic interaction between humans and natures. Instead, I highlight the urgent need to question the legitimization of all manner of socio-environmental politics, policies, and eco-technical proposals and interventions that are made in the name of a thoroughly imagined and symbolized Nature or Sustainability. The above reconceptualization urges us to accept the extraordinary variability of natures; insists on the need to make a “wager” on natures; forces us to choose politically between this rather than that nature; invites us to plunge into the relatively unknown, expect the unexpected, accept that not all there is can be known, and, most importantly, fully endorse the violent moment that is inscribed in any concrete or real socio-environmental intervention.

Indeed, the ultimate aim of politics—and thus of design, planning, and architecture—is to change the given socio-environmental ordering in a certain manner. Like any intervention, this is a contested act, and its practice erases at least partly what is there in order to erect something new and different. The recognition that political acts are singular interventions that produce particular socio-ecological arrangements and milieus and, in doing so, foreclose the possibility of others emerging is of central importance. The “violence” inscribed in such choice has to be fully endorsed. For example, one cannot simultaneously have a truly carbon-neutral city and permit unlimited car-based mobility. They are mutually exclusive. Even less can an egalitarian, democratic, solidarity-based, and ecologically sensible urban future be produced without marginalizing or excluding those who insist on the private appropriation of the commons of the earth and its mobilization for accumulation, personal enrichment, and hereditary transfer of accumulated resources.

Such contested and often mutually exclusive encounters, of course, always constitute a political act, one that can be legitimized only in political terms, and not through an externalized legitimation

that resides in a fantasy of Nature or Sustainability. Any political act is one that reorders socio-ecological coordinates and patterns, reconfigures uneven socio-ecological relationships, often with unforeseen or unforeseeable consequences, and cannot please everyone; they are inherently non-consensual.

While “traditional” democratic policies are based on majoritarian principles, the democratic-egalitarian perspective that I defend insists on foregrounding equality and socio-ecological solidarity as the foundational gesture for an inclusive, common and ega-libertarian green urban future. Politicizing environments democratically, then, becomes an issue of enhancing the urban democratic political content of socio-environmental construction by means of identifying the strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more egalitarian mode of producing urban natures can be achieved. This requires the nurturing of processes of democratization (as spaces for the enunciation of agonistic dispute) as a foundation and condition of possibility for more egalitarian urban socio-ecological arrangements, and the naming of positively embodied “ega-libertarian” socio-ecological futures that are immediately realizable. In other words, egalitarian urban ecologies are about demanding the impossible and realizing the improbable, and this is exactly the challenge the Anthropocene poses. This, of course, requires taking sides, choosing one trajectory rather than another, and insists on the axiomatic equality of each and all in a democratizing polity. Most importantly, it pits those who are bent on maintaining the current trajectory that produces a combined and uneven socio-ecological apocalypse radically against those who prefigure an inclusive and egalitarian production of socio-ecological urban commons. Rather than invoking a normative notion of environmental justice or of an idealized (balanced) nature, our perspective insists on focusing on the realities of the presumed democratic political equality in the decision-making processes that organize socio-ecological transformation and choreograph the management of the commons. In doing so, the attention shifts from a techno-managerial, physico-ecological or ethical perspective to a resolutely political vantage point—articulated around the notion of equality—that considers the ecological conundrum to be inexorably associated with democratic political acting and focuses on the fundamentally politicized conditions through which natures become produced (Swyngedouw 2014).

In sum, the politicization of the environment is predicated on the recognition of the indeterminacy of nature, the constitutive split of the people, the unconditional democratic demand of political equality, and the real possibility of the inauguration of various possible public and collective urban socio-ecological futures that express the democratic presumptions of freedom and equality.

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Further reading

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