The urban public sector as commons: Response to Susser and Tonnelat

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Susser and Tonnelat's article on the three urban commons is both visionary and heartening. Its counterpastoral polemic glorifies urban modes of sociality and the forms of common property fostered by urban life. The authors find in cities communities of experience that cross class lines and create inadvertent coalitions around shared problems. They argue that specific components of what has been called "the right to the city" need to be understood as "commons"—collective property that is neither fully public nor private but shared by individuals as they go about everyday life in urban settings.

Praise for urban life has a long history, from Aristotle's claim that the city-state was the highest form of community to St. Augustine's portrayal of heaven as a city. One of the most compelling recent examples is Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (2011). In it, Young proposes a normative ideal of city life "as an alternative to both the ideal of community and the liberal individualism it criticizes" (2011: 237). Defining city life as "the being together of strangers," she claims that in cities we situate our identity and activity in relation to a vast horizon of other activity. City dwellers, she claims, "depend on the mediation of thousands of other people and vast organizational resources in order to accomplish their individual ends," and are thus uniquely bound together. But even in this most enthusiastic endorsement of urban life, Young throws in a caveat: being together

creates common problems and interests, but does not necessarily create a stable community of shared ends, mutual identification, and reciprocity (2011: 237–238). I doubt that Susser and Tonnelat want to suggest that urbanism breeds progressive social change in and of itself. There are simply too many counterexamples, including some drawn from the "wounded cities" that Susser has previously catalogued. Rather, the burning questions for progressives are: *Which aspects* of urban life foster virtuous kinds of connectedness? *Under what circumstances* can these forms of urbanism generate stable political community and positive social transformation?

Susser and Tonnelat point toward something new here. Their framing of the three urban commons posits three specific forms of shared experience that may generate collective sociality: common reliance on public services; use of shared public space; and collective artistic mobilization. My background prepares me poorly to comment on the last two phenomena, but the production and consumption of public services has recently emerged as a central theme in my research on labor. In 2011, this issue was propelled into the public domain in the United States (and into my research) by legislative attacks on public workers in a dozen states—assaults in which state workers not only lost benefits and bargaining rights but were reviled as "welfare queens" whose labor contributed nothing to the economy. In 2012, the right-wing

frenzy that followed President Obama's comment that business owners had not built their enterprises alone, but had relied on government-provided infrastructure like roads, bridges, and public educational systems, underscored the continuing controversy. In these debates in the United States, and in European debt reduction negotiations, we have seen battle lines drawn over the public sector's role in supporting the economy and the citizenry.

Since the 1970s, the global political right has been honing the argument that public services do not contribute to economic growth, but are a net drain on the economy. At the same time, inequality has increased to unprecedented levels, and wealthy citizens have engaged in what some have called "class secession". In the words of one US senator: "America's top tier has grown infinitely richer and more removed over the past 25 years. It is not unfair to say that they are literally living in a different country. Few among them send their children to our public schools" (James Webb [D-VA], quoted in Perucci 2008: 66).

Just as the rich eschew public schools, they do not require public parks (they have country clubs), public transportation (private cars and planes), and health maintenance organizations (personalized medical services). Michael Lind (2010) has argued that members of the business class increasingly earn their fortunes with overseas labor, selling to overseas consumers and managing financial transactions that have little to do with the rest of the United States. Given this fact, he argues that "it is hardly surprising that so many of them should be hostile to paying taxes to support the infrastructure and the social programs that help the majority of the American people."

Susser and Tonnelat suggest that urban dwellers are particularly reliant on and supportive of public goods and services. As evidence, they point to the ubiquity of public transportation, reliance on public amenities, and recent struggles in some cities to resist privatization of public services. There is clearly nothing like urban garbage strikes or failed snow removal to generate collective indignation. And density and

propinquity can foil attempts to buy one's way out of the indignities of urban life: having a private car in Manhattan may not be more convenient than taking the subway and retaining a private garbage service is not much of a remedy if the streets are piled with the waste of others. It seems reasonable to expect that rubbing elbows in dense urban areas does generate support for many public projects.

Cities are not immune, however, to skyrocketing inequality and projects of class secession. Saskia Sassen (1998) has delineated the unique ways that labor market polarization in the service sector plays out in global cities, generating new forms of employment-centered inequality. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a new bipolarity in urban labor markets emerged—a demand for highly specialized and educated "knowledge workers" alongside demand for low-wage nannies and food service, retail, and sanitation workers. When and how individuals of such diverse life circumstances come to see themselves as collectively reliant on the public sector is an intriguing—and unanswered—question. It seems reasonable to expect that urban neighborhoods will create greater opportunities for cross-class consciousness of the public good than gated suburban communities. But the very wealthy often have homes in both, as well as a variety of rural retreats. Clearly public services will have a different meaning for these part-time urban denizens than for the urban multitude. More significantly however, if economic elites have restructured their class practices around "spaces of flows" rather than "spaces of place" (to quote Castells 2008), is urbanity really a sufficient condition for organizing in response to them?

Susser and Tonnelat are right to suggest that the most radical urban visions of collective ownership of public services occur when public sector workers join hands with citizens who rely on their labor in new community-based movements. These movements, which resist neoliberal assault on the public sector, call for a critical re-evaluation of the division of labor among market, state, and civil society. They highlight

the social reproductive work that sustains the current generation and socializes the next. Since the 1970s, this labor has increasingly shifted from family to the public sphere, as women work more hours outside the home and public teachers, day care workers, and health aides paid for by state medical assistance fill the gap, as does the historically important social reproductive work of garbage collectors, snowplow drivers, crossing guards, fire fighters, and police officers. Social movements that protect this sphere draw on collective interests that include but exceed traditional labor movements. They draw in citizens bound together by their common reliance on the state to provide services they cannot organize for themselves. This consciousness is not uniquely urban—the hinterland supported rural electrification and interstate highways. More recently, in Wisconsin, the dependence of both urban poor and farm families on state medical assistance led to a rural-urban coalition not seen since the Progressive Era Farmer-Labor Party. It is also not inevitable that such coalitions will emerge in urban settings—where the wealthiest still create enclaves of private privilege. Susser and Tonnelat are correct in suggesting that cities provide fertile ground for such movements, but we need to probe more deeply to establish when and how such coalitions emerge. In short, we need to trace the shifts in the strategies of global capitalist actors, and the transformations in class relationships they are working, to correctly perceive the op-

portunities for urban (and other) social movements to cohere.

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