Transformative cities: A response to Narotzky, Collins, and Bertho

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When our article was first written, the Occupy movement was in full swing and we were clearly in optimistic mode. However, as all studies of social movements have shown, from the anti-apartheid struggles of South Africa to the rebellious nineteenth century in France or Britain, the road of mobilization is never straightforward. Nor did we assume that “Occupy” in the United States or even the popular rebellions of the Arab Spring would lead to a blossoming of democratic nations. We take these understandings from writers such as Eric Hobsbawm (1996), who understood the French Revolution and the British industrial revolution as complementary processes that set the stage for the imperfect and unequal nation-states of France and Britain today. In South Africa (to pick one historic moment), after the high school students who took to the streets in protest in Soweto were mowed down by South African army tanks, the streets were virtually quiescent for a decade. However, over 40 years of fascism in South Africa, the 1950s bus boycotts, the 1960s Sharpeville massacre, the famous trials of Mandela and others, the Soweto school children, and finally the union mobilization in a United Front and international sanctions led to the end of apartheid. But, as we are all now aware, these battles did not end inequality or neoliberalism.

However, we do not mean to invent a teleological story of progress through mobilization. The Wisconsin mobilization discussed by Jane Collins, based on the production and consump-

tion of public services, has historical parallels in the welfare rights movement of the 1960s. As Cloward and Piven (1971) argued, the welfare rights movement for a moment united the public workers with the city dwellers demanding adequate assistance, although public sector workers of that era did not yet have the legal right to collective bargaining and affirmative action laws, which opened the civil service to minority workers, were not yet in place (The Rank and Filer 2012). In 1965 in New York City, before the 1967 Taylor Law that allowed public employees collective bargaining rights, the welfare workers struck for 28 days. They demanded not only workers’ rights but also services for their clients, and particularly a winter clothing allowance, which they won. In 1967, the welfare workers struck again, this time for three days, but abandoned the winter clothing allowance and included no other client services in their demands. Over the next decades, while public sector unions became powerful actors in New York City, worker-client alliances all but disappeared. On a cold day just before Christmas 2005, when Stéphane Tonnelat, along with wife and two children, brought coffee to the Transport Workers Union picketers at the 126th street depot, the subway and bus workers were surprised at such an unexpected show of support by a regular user (who was himself conducting fieldwork on subway users). Indeed, the whole city, including the Straphangers Campaign, seemed to be siding with the mayor and

governor, who were accusing the union of making the city and its inhabitants lose millions of dollars everyday. For lack of an alliance, pressured by courts acting upon the provisions of the Taylor Law that denied public service employees the right to strike, the workers lost. Only recently in Wisconsin has a public service movement achieved success, thanks to a renewed alliance with users, showing how important a consideration of the commons provided by these amenities is to effective mobilization.

What we suggest in our article is, as Bertho argues, that the city has become a major site and the focus of class struggle. As social historians long ago noted, class issues are broader than labor and involve transportation, housing, women's community demands, the price of meat and bread, air pollution, access to clean water, and leisure (Gutman 1973). Indeed, we cannot forget the importance of women's bread riots and the celebration of International Women's Day in precipitating the uprisings in Russia in 1905 and 1917, among other historic transformations. To strengthen the point that cultural workers and women are crucial participants in progressive transformation in 2012, we see that the sacrilegious performance in a cathedral by women's punk rock group Pussy Riot has highlighted the many grassroots youth protests in Russia today. As the gap between the richest and the rest has become so large, we can perhaps understand the three urban commons we outline as crucial to most working- and middle-class people. We do not mean to include in our argument the richest fraction, who can remove themselves from most problems. We know from many recent studies that the 99 percent, even when they are not the poorest, are subject to greater health problems, more crime, and more gendered violence the more unequal the society (Wilkinson and Picket 2009). The 99 percent, not just the precariat, are subject to much greater risk as well (Beck 1992). In the era of flexible accumulation, the middle and working classes suffer unpredictable losses, through loss of employment, downsizing, exportation and automation of professional skills, and assembly line work, and to this we add the increasingly extreme weather produced by global warming.

Narotzky takes a definition of the commons as exclusive and regulated. The exclusion means that nonmembers of the community are barred from using the resource while regulations prevent overuse and underinvestment by members. As much as we agree with the necessary regulatory aspects of the management of common resource, we do not find Ostrom's theory to be exclusive or linked to a definite community (Ostrom and Field 1999). On the contrary, the resilience of the commons, on which Ostrom (1990) bases her theory, is premised on an inclusion of all people affected by the resource. This means that each common resource, from the local pasture to the atmosphere that we breath, works at a specific ecological scale and that each person included in that scale should have a stake in the common resource. When it is a pasture, users may indeed form a closed and tight-knit community. But even then, they may have to accept new members, for example, when strangers settle in the village. Of course, the larger the resource, the more difficult it becomes to define the appropriate ecological scale and to devise the right mix of local and larger institutional controls. This is one challenge for the urban commons that we identify in our article and we do not, any more than Harvey (2012) and Ostrom (Dietz et al. 2003), have a ready-made solution. Like these authors, we can only look closely at what different groups of people are inventing in many places. We wish to understand the multiple ways in which they are contesting the appropriation and impoverishment of their public services, homes, and work, and of their public spaces by capital markets and by free riders. In this process we wish to highlight emerging alternative visions of urban society.

In this regard, Collins is right when she doubts that many of the really rich will cooperate in cross-class alliances, because they can simply opt out of the commons all together with their private neighborhoods, private schools, private health system, etc. But the city makes it impossible to completely opt out, if only because the maintenance of these private amenities involves many workers whose livelihood, just like other urbanites, depends on the public structures and collective amenities of the city

(Sassen 1991). As they falsely opt out, the super-rich behave like free riders who refuse to contribute resources to maintain and improve public services and public spaces, both in their living city and in places around the world where they need a workforce.

Thus, we argue that the battles for “the right to the city” or the recent urban social movements have drawn on class alliances based on these three urban commons. Occupy was originally dreamed up by Kalle Lasn, the designer and editor of the radical aesthetic magazine *Ad-busters*, and his colleagues when they asked, “Are you ready for a Tahrir Moment” alongside the tag, #OccupyWallStreet. Inspired by cultural workers, it drew much of its energy and national legitimacy from the college-educated unemployed who slept in the streets along with the homeless and the poorest residents of the city. As a movement in the United States, it put poverty and inequality back on the political agenda. In fact, it gave the Democratic Party the impetus to focus on taxing the rich and maintaining public services as well as to win the elections. Clearly, more research is needed to identify the particular forms of mobilization that seem most effective. However, we argue that much current ethnographic work illuminates these forms of class alliances; as middle-class families can no longer reproduce their class standing for their children and cultural workers can no longer survive on the margins of society, the processes of dispossession lead to more unified urban social movements in defense of the three commons.

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