Chapter 12

Flexible Marxism and the Metropolis

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Proletarian revolutions . . . criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts.

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*

We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without ascending it, the work would have been permitted.

Franz Kafka, *Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way*

In what follows, I want to argue for a recovered and reconstructed Marxian scholarship in urban studies. Rehearsing in detail why Marxism has disappeared from radical political and intellectual agendas during the last decade isn't, however, something I want to get too involved in here. To frame the existential panic experienced by Marxists we might merely recall Neil Smith's wry observation: "The Enlightenment is dead, Marxism is dead, the working class is dead . . . and the author does not feel very well either." After almost two decades of neoconservative rule in many Western countries, imprimatur has been given to "free market" neoliberalism, forcing socialist organizations and unions into decidedly defensive postures. In intellectual milieux, too, new cultural practices and styles of thought – like postmodernism – have hastily swept in and assumed growing hegemony within radical ranks, supplanting class and political-economic issues with those of culture and identity. Meanwhile, the nigh apocalyptical implosion of the former Communist countries meant the panic Smith expressed with such immediacy was effectively to reach meltdown proportions. For while the wide-reaching events in the old Eastern

bloc were generally celebrated by socialists, they still posed some very awkward questions for those operating from a broadly anticapitalist stance. It was almost the way Nietzsche had warned: maybe these scholars had been looking too long into the abyss and now the abyss was starting to look back at them.

Urban studies itself – that interdisciplinary field which includes city and regional planning, urban sociology and anthropology, cultural studies, and urban geography – hasn't been immune from the intellectual incredulity and weariness with Marx (see Sayer 1995a, and for the opposite argument Harvey 1987). This strikes me as rather ironical and tragic: ironical, because for a while some of the most original urban research came out of the Marxist tradition; tragic, because undoubtedly some of the best Marxism has been conducted by Marxist urban scholars. Spearheaded by the likes of Henri Lefebvre's *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968) and *La Pensée Marxiste et la Ville* (1972), Manuel Castells's *The Urban Question* (1972) and David Harvey's *Social Justice and City* (1973), the critical edge of a surgent Marxist scholarship emerged during the early 1970s with an imaginative grandeur and sweeping power. A lot of this work, as Marshall Berman has reminded us, "brings us closer to the historical long waves that drive and wreck our lives; and forces us to see ourselves and one another and our whole society and all our inner contradictions in depth face to face. If Marxist thought can do that, I think it has plenty to be proud of. But I know a lot of people for whom that isn't enough; they feel Marxism has to provide a transcendent revolutionary *zap*" (Berman 1991: 420).

This yearning for a transcendent revolutionary zap looks a little distant right now, and such a "Big Bang" theory of Marxism presents radical urbanists with awkward problems. An obvious dilemma is that beyond relentless criticism Marxism has very little constructive to say about cities – except for advocating the exorcism of markets. It apparently has no truck with anything that leaves the capitalist city intact. Now this perspective isn't, I think, so much wrong as rather one-sided, narrow in its vision, closed in its horizons with respect to prospective action and political possibilities, *in the immediate term*. The deepening of market relations in our own society and sheer commodification of daily life certainly requires Marxists, on the one hand, to redouble their denunciations of the city and the power of capital. On the other hand, though, a rethink is maybe in order as well. Indeed, the failure to consider the city *more dialectically* has confined Marxist urban studies to a proverbial Weberian iron cage. And the withering away of Marxist urban scholarship, and the *ennui* currently expressed towards it, isn't unrelated to the conceptual inflexibility and the political straightjacket it has created for itself.

"Street Marxism" and the Practice of Dialectics

One route for understanding, practically negotiating, and contesting actual injustices and assorted forms of domination and exclusion might be to develop a more flexible Marxism *from the street upwards*. This "street Marxism" would amount to something of a "messy" Marxism and would try to understand and confront the raw edges and awkward actuality of people's lives in cities today. It would, above all, tease out and interpolate the *practical* thrust of Marx's own thought. Here, Marx went to pains to stress that the pursuit of justice is not something solvable by speculation or normative theory building – which, he claimed, is a "purely scholarly

question." Instead, it is, like all other mysteries in the human world, a question of *practice* and of the comprehension of that practice (see Marx 1978). And this practice would be constituted by actual human activity – organizing, activism, protests, demonstrations, and probably violent struggle – responsive to present historical and geographical conditions, the outcome of which is impossible to predict with certainty. "We must recognize," says Althusser, "that there is no practice in general, but only *distinct* practices" (Althusser 1970: 58). That's why Marx smacks as an anti-utopian: it isn't that socialism will unequivocally lead to the negation of all injustices; more that we have to begin to work through prevailing injustices by practically addressing them in the here and now, in their various guises and complexities, right in front of us. A flexible Marxism, therefore, wouldn't contain any systematic program or prefigurative blueprint, but would assume, as Cohen has suggested, that "[a]ll change in modern conditions of social differentiation and international integration is perforce incremental, 2 percent here, 5 percent there, accumulating after, say, fifteen years, into a revolution" (Cohen 1995: 5). The zap would duly come about doggedly and on the due installments plan. In the meantime, there is plenty of contested terrain between actually existing late capitalism and prospective socialism which can be fought over, here and now, and with reworked Marxian categories.

In practice, this flexible urban Marxism would insist upon an honest conviction to the dialectic and to the street. The dialectic, of course, is a critical view of the world and a workable method for studying problems in our cities. Dialectical thought, more specifically, prioritizes change – everything is evolving and changing over time and space – while positing the world as interconnected at every level. Moreover, various relations between parts of urban reality invariably express contradictions, antagonisms, and ambiguities that need to be understood holistically. Used by Marxists, dialectical analysis abstracts from the directly empirical world and develops concepts that emphasize interconnections and imperceptible patterns between various aspects of society that somehow appear isolated and unrelated. It shows that there's actually more going on in daily life situations, that *unobservable presences* are also active (and destructive), and these have to be understood more fully in order to take action for or against them. Dialecticians suggest that our world appears in a form which often belies *other truths about it*.

That the dialectic can help us glimpse another reality is evident from a contemporary example from urban Britain. More recently, Conservative and Labour politicians alike have castigated aggressive beggars, squeegee merchants, and homeless people. These concerns have caused considerable furore within the British Left because they've been voiced by Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw. (Straw, apparently, had studied "The Year of Change: Reengineering the New York City Police Department," a study written in 1995 by Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and ex-Police Chief William Bratton.) Now, both parties in Britain endorse rights for citizens to walk the streets unharassed by people demanding money and to enter parks that have supposedly become exclusive junkie havens, huddles for winos, scenes of cardboard communities. Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city" thesis has thereby taken on a strange revanchist twist. Not surprisingly, controversy has ensued over this "get tough" policy on street people and over the "clean up" campaign for urban public spaces. New York, the pioneer in these initiatives, is apparently

tutoring London's drive. Lee Stringer, a former editor of New York's homeless paper *Street News* and author of the acclaimed *Grand Central Winter: Stories from the Street*, has commented on the tone of this assault: "If you can blame a person for being homeless, you can ignore them . . . To many New Yorkers that's very attractive." It's an option that now appears very attractive to some Londoners as well. But a dialectical interpretation could give a less fetishized, deeper, and more rounded insight into affairs.

Everyday street life – that directly immediate, palpable, and observable world – is the scale where everybody gives meaning and substance to their lives. To feel safe and happy in the street and in the city's public space is thus an ontological priority. Nevertheless, the street *internalizes* other forces and other realities – abstract forces and processes, which, as Marx warned us in *Capital*, are sometimes "imperceptible to the senses" (Marx 1967: 77–8). Accordingly, it takes a special kind of thinking and person to see and feel at once concrete *experience* and abstract *processes* and then try to live them out and understand them as one world, in their totality. (Gramsci suggested that "organic intellectuals" were equipped with this special kind of sensibility.) True, homelessness, street begging and alcoholism are conditioned by a whole array of complex psychological, personal, and domestic factors. (Homeless women, for instance, have often fled their homes to escape male domestic violence.) As these factors manifest themselves concretely in daily life, out on the street, they're often seen as pathological, as nuisances that have to be endured and experienced by "ordinary" passers-by. And yet, on the other hand, if the personal and individual is taken relationally and embedded in a broader socioeconomic and political context, which both incorporates and constrains individual agency, a different truth bursts forth. In British cities, *The Big Issue* homeless magazine tries to voice such an alternative: it conveys, as it says, a discourse which "comes up from the streets." The paper is a fine example of what Gramsci once called "integral journalism": a criticism and journalism which "seeks to arouse" and "seeks to enlarge its public" (Gramsci 1988: 383). This is grist to the mill for any aspiring Marxist urbanist, yet only if it can be embedded in the larger pattern of things. And a Marxist dialectical framework still has a lot to say about the interconnections and contradictions of this larger political-economic pattern.

Consider, briefly, Britain over the 1980s and 1990s. Here job losses, employment "restructuring" and income deficiencies have prompted enormous mortgage repossessions in many cities. Now, even paying jobs in London aren't reasonable enough to provide affordable and decent accommodation (Harloe 1992: 189–204). Moreover, cuts in public housing (London has lost over 74,000 public sector units since 1985) and the brutal marketization of the private rental housing sector under Conservative rule has meant money and capital exponentially flowing into profitable speculation, thus sanctioning extortionate rental appropriation. Working and nonworking people alike have been priced out of whole sectors of London's housing market. And because local authority and voluntary sectors have been starved of adequate funding by both the Tories and New Labour, there has been little net to break the fall of the needy. When matched with excessive office speculation and reconversion – with large numbers now standing vacant – that homelessness appears as the end *observable reality* is hardly startling.

David Harvey's *Limits to Capital* is invaluable for comprehending the paradoxical coexistence of homeless people huddled in doorways of office and commercial properties festooned with that veritable icon of 1990s British urbanism: "TO LET" signs. In *Limits*, Harvey put forward the powerful thesis that land is a form of fictitious capital, a pure financial asset, intimately entwined with the circulation of interest-bearing capital. Consequently, urban space is increasingly structured around what Harvey calls the "secondary circuit of capital." The insight remains a vital point of reference for Marxists trying to understand the process of capitalist urbanization (see Harvey 1978 and 1982, esp. pp. 367–72). Following Henri Lefebvre's earlier (and underdeveloped) insight from *The Urban Revolution*, Harvey suggests that slow growth and excess capacity – or "overaccumulation" in Marx's terminology – in the manufacturing "primary circuit" of industrial capital has been the main impetus behind "switching" toward short-term speculative pecuniary pursuits. The chasing of rental income through investment in the so-called "secondary" or built environment circuit of capital comes into its own here. Now, real estate has offered particularly profitable returns *vis-à-vis* other investment portfolios, thus engendering a spatial solution – or a "spatial fix" – to potential economic recession and crisis.

Close affinities thereby become apparent between interest rates and anticipated land and rental values. Movements in interest rates impose strong temporal rhythms on the geographical structure of capitalist cities. Links between the supply and demand for money capital and the supply and demand for land become tight. Low interest rates and surpluses of money capital generally signal enhanced land values. The perpetual search for greater future ground rents not only regulates land prices but equally promotes activities on land that conform to the highest and best commercial uses. Land treated as a pure financial asset, Harvey concludes, regulates a "rational" landscape of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption. Land prices, then, dictate the actions of property developers and the myriad of parasitic agents involved in the real-estate sector, and the timing of their specific actions gets determined by the overall rate of interest (see Merrifield 1993).

The speculative character of land and real estate is writ large. To the wily investor, capital can be invested into land at a specific moment in time to produce a new material basis for the appropriation of a higher (differential) rent. Yet this process also realizes a space whose own material viability is then extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in interest rates and vagaries in the global economy. And, of course, with an increasingly integrated and deregulated financial system, inevitable shifts in interest rates, at home and abroad, can dramatically affect investment fortunes everywhere. High interest rates mean high costs of borrowing, depressed demand for commercial space, and generally lower rents. In this climate, too, some developers might be "overexposed." Overinvestment in the real-estate sector and the mountains of unrealized fictitious titles to future rents that pile up are disciplined in much the same way as the circulation of *real* capital disciplines *fictitious* capital: through glut, slump, and devaluation. Devaluation and glut may mean that many landowners and freeholders sit on property, milk their assets, and wait till the financial and real-estate climate becomes more buoyant. Kingsway, in central London, a main North–South boulevard adjacent to an expanding Covent Garden, is a prominent example of this phenomenon right now. Boarded-up properties,

dereliction, and general shoddiness of much of its built environment betoken upscaling at some future date, and a possible incorporation into the Covent Garden development. In the interim, it's these empty office spaces under which many homeless bodies now cower and huddle or else try to sell *The Big Issue*. National Health Service cuts, deinstitutionalization, and the patent failure of Care in the Community policies to cater adequately for the mentally ill have, meanwhile, forced many patients out on to the streets, under these vacant doorways, where, unable to cope for themselves, such people too become vulnerable to brutalities of living on the street. And for huge chunks of the nation's population, both young and old, with little hope of a decent job, home or bright future, that some eventually turn to alcohol and drugs and end up as *habitués* of the streets is shocking enough but not entirely unexpected to the vigilant urbanist. "Pauperism," Marx says, is the "hospital" of the working classes (Marx 1967: 603) and its wards are now the streets, doorways, and deserted parks of our cities. Imperceptible structural processes mesh with perceptible daily experience. Two truths reveal themselves to the initiated as one truth, as a paradoxical dialectical truth.

A lot of people nowadays find themselves "set free," tossed out of work, downsized and rightsized and outsourced, downgraded into the ranks of a "contingent worker" – didn't Marx call them "floating relative surplus populations"? Maybe some of these people never thought of themselves as Marx's "modern working class," never dreamt they'd one day join the ranks of the partially employed or wholly unemployed or even homeless, especially because some weren't factory hands nor blue-collar workers, but instead wore suits and were employed in offices or labs or schools or dealing rooms. Yet now they too must sell themselves piecemeal, as a commodity, finding work only insofar as their labor is able to pile up capital for somebody else. Today few workers are safe; many are at the mercy of market demands and vicissitudes in competition for labor-power. This is really what Marx meant by the "working class" and why he saw its ranks growing (see Berman 1998).

The product of this "lean" urbanization inevitably unfurls on the city street itself where it's there for everybody to see, hear, and encounter each day, if not always to fully understand. City streets in Britain, as in the United States, bear the grisly scars of a society which has an ideological and material aversion to public policy and which favors instead corporate greed over civic virtue. Out on the streets, domestic and personal circumstances cascade and become embroiled with, and exacerbated by, macro and structural forces: a relentless and vicious dialectic takes hold leaving many people teetering on the edge of the abyss; and some plunge into it. Yet dialecticians have a distinctive role to play in revealing these ties, of pointing out subtle links as well as brutal interconnections; and making them known to the public at large. Dialecticians, in short, have a responsibility to promote a critical understanding of the world. Why else would Gramsci argue in *Prison Notebooks* that Marxist dialectical analysis shouldn't be an abstract "higher" mode of thought, but must enter into *people's common sense itself* (Gramsci 1971: 328–31)? That way, Marxism as a philosophy of dialectical praxis can give people a better critical handle on their world and on the bigger context of their immediate life situation.

So while some people will still feel threatened and intimidated by the convulsions of the street, with a deeper knowledge of the mechanisms *producing* this grim

scenario they might at least be able to look street people in the eyes, have more compassion, show greater patience and caring, be more sympathetic and tolerant towards the homeless, beggars, and the poor. Meantime, greater knowledge of the underlying injustices could spark anger and disgust at a society that either normalizes or criminalizes such circumstances, and seeks to play people off against each other and uses all forms of prejudice and intolerance to motivate wealth creation and prosperity. And who knows, maybe this disgust and anger might even be converted into action that struggles for social change.

Marxists and Marxist urbanists can expose received ideas, reactionary ideologies and fetishized understandings of reality, and show links between individuation and process, between concrete events and abstract forces, between the personal and the political. And yet, to do it, they, we, equally need to be receptive to the sights, sounds, horrors, and experiences of the city street itself. The street really isn't a bad barometer for reflecting what's what in city life, politics, and culture. Streets and urban public spaces have long been the terrain for encounters, protests, and sufferings. That social change is invariably sanctioned in the street and in public was always acknowledged by the former Conservative government; they were forever fearful and paranoid of any public gathering or direct action – like strikes, antiroad and car protests, raves, and animal liberation demos – seeking to contest their once fragile and unconvincing grip on British society. The 1994 Criminal Justice Act was imposed precisely to crush this vital and primal encounter in the street. Notwithstanding, Marxist urbanists can abstract and problematize society from the level of the city street and develop more general concepts and practices and actions that seek to explain and transform present concrete realities there. In so doing, Marxists can try to keep intact all that is inspiring, heroic, and beautiful in city cultural life while attempting to stamp out its horrific economic injustices and political oppressions – which are insidiously abstract and global, and glaringly concrete and particular, in nature. This is maybe one way how urban and dialectical Marxism can be put back to work and inspire new hope.

The City Dialectic, the Dialectical City

There's another challenge and possibility that the dialectical worldview presents for Marxists and Marxist urbanists. For, if being dialectical is to highlight ambiguity and contradiction, then the challenge now is for Marxism to find somehow ways to thrive off ambiguity and contradiction. Sure, Marxists should work against ambiguity and contradiction, but also *make ambiguity and contradiction work for Marxism*. There are many ways this can be done. Consider the market itself. In the past, Marxists have been right to show how markets operate to create and perpetuate inequality and injustice. Throughout the seventies, urban Marxism tended to hold absolute incredulity toward the market and commodity culture. Yet the problem is, for the foreseeable future at least, markets are here to stay. Where does that leave dialectical analysis in the interim? Marx himself used dialectical insight to criticize the market. He recognized the dramatic expansion of the productive forces and market relations as at once liberatory and repressive: new communities were certainly opened up and horizons were broadened and fresh ideas emerge. But these eventually become new communities and ideas dominated by the *real* community of

money and markets (Marx 1973: 225). All ideas – radical or otherwise – become commodified and can be used to expand capital and create new markets. Marx realized how capitalism generates a market even for radical ideas. Does it follow that radical ideas can use – as well as be used by – the market to propagate and nourish radical politics? Of course it does. It has to.

Marxists have to give up on the idea of the market as "original sin" or as somehow a source of "inauthenticity." After all, we know enough about commodities, markets, and capital not to leave their concerns exclusively to bourgeois apologists and free-marketeers. Marx left us a colossal intellectual legacy in three volumes of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, the bulk of which has formally stood the test of time. The bulky "Chapter on Money" in the *Grundrisse*, for example, offers a brilliant conceptualization of what Marx calls the "transcendental power of money" in bourgeois society. His analysis posits money in its material, symbolic, and representative form, and some of Marx's discussion on money as a "symbol of itself" really prefigures Baudrillard by more than a hundred years (Marx 1973: 141–5).

Thus it is well known to Marxists how commodities are produced and exchanged and how money circulates to become capital, how capital inexorably accumulates and circulates in its different forms, and how it propels people into situations where they are forced to act in ways which they might not have otherwise. Left unchecked, money and markets are forces which create and perpetuate inequality and class power. Marxist research here across various disciplinary spectrums has taught us to know that playing with markets necessarily means playing with fire. Nevertheless, Marxists have little choice now but to use their vast critical knowledge to devise ways of burning their hands minimally and of showing how fire can also warm and create light. The recent work of Andrew Sayer has begun to pose these sorts of questions (see esp. Sayer 1995b). Sayer's aim is, I think, fair enough: that of trying to "go beyond Marxism" – especially its unqualified resistance to markets. That said, unlike Sayer, I am not convinced that Hayekian liberalism helps to transcend the prevailing impasse within Left political-economic thinking. The struggle to develop Marxist ideas and politics has to be an intensely dialectical one: at once a struggle *in* and *against* the market and *in* and *against* the state apparatuses, but also knowing when to be *for* and *against* certain market and investment practices.

Meanwhile, there is absolutely no reason why Marxist urbanists cannot push for more limited "reformist" aims like rent control in the city, explore the strengths and weaknesses of community empowerment and self-management, monitor and lobby against financial institutions to prevent property speculation and gentrification activities, support ventures designed to aid the homeless, like buying *The Big Issue*. Radical change comes, if it comes – Althusser, after all, warned that knowledge and emancipation is never *guaranteed* (Althusser 1970: 54–8) – bit by bit, over the long haul. Likewise, actions geared towards such redistributive justice need to be combined with combating injustices that are not uniquely capitalist in orientation (like racism, homophobia, and sexism). Then, maybe it's possible to foster ideas and actions that seek to humanize or "socialize" the market (Elson 1988) while developing more compassionate forms of human intercourse based around tenderness, tolerance, and generosity rather than hate and selfishness. And – who knows – even at some time in the long run push towards a "postmarket" society. (Raymond Williams, remember, suggested that this might be a "long revolution.") Marx

knew how markets were disempowering. But Engels knew, maybe better than Marx himself, how they could empower as well; and empower those seeking to disempower markets! (Don't forget, Engels used money and capital from his father's Manchester textile company tirelessly to support Marx's lifelong revolutionary pretensions.)

Within cities we know how market dictates and capital investment trends can produce sanitized, anodyne "theme park" urban spaces while divestment renders other areas whole urban wastelands. Yet within the ruins, peripheries, and interstices are spaces where struggle and resistance on behalf of the dispossessed can lead to passionate creative activity and collective vibrancy: music, art, graffiti, poetry, and various subcultural tendencies. Some of this, of course, becomes commodified, some does not; some might be burned by its own success and turned into a phony Hollywood scam or undergo utter commodification and corporate reappropriation (like rap music). Still, the dispossessed can use markets to liberate themselves and rise to prominence and even move to another part of town, *yet somehow still stay radical and subversive*.

Inevitably, though, the boundaries between freedom, empowerment, and existential exploration, and tyranny, oppression, and injustice, will be blurry in cities, and are made blurrier again when markets start to impinge and intrude. Sometimes wresting the lever of economic power and manipulating markets can be used to assert political power and just recognition. Certain expressions of freedom in the city – lifestyle affairs, affinity group politics, subcultural and underground activities (e.g. eroticism and S&M) – often don't actively threaten market relations but actually use commodity culture for their own political ends. For example, the "café culture" and healthy development of a "pink economy" in London's Soho has permitted considerable empowerment and freedom for some gay men.

Dialecticians can and should thrive off ambiguity and ambivalence. There's plainly much scope for radical political, intellectual, and artistic maneuver here – maybe more than Marxist urbanists during the 1970s accepted – both against and within the market, where great opportunities reside and daunting threats brood. Markets expose individual inadequacies and so often force people apart and prey off greed to cajole them into competing against each other. But elsewhere the market can bring people together, can compel people to act and struggle collectively to correct its failings and inequities. In a sense, Marx himself tried to reveal the enormous creative power of conflict, of *human dissatisfaction*, of human history and geography progressing with its worst foot forward – as Henri Lefebvre always liked to point out. Paradoxically, it's clear how much art and literature and kinship have developed out of conflict and dissatisfaction. Think of places like Tompkins Square Park in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, especially around homelessness and antigentrification struggles (Smith 1996). The pages of Joel Rose's and Catherine Texier's literary journal *Between C and D* or the *East Village Eye* tell us a lot about an endearing and rugged neighborhood that's been at the cutting edge of life and death for a while now (Rose and Texier 1988; Moore and Gosciak 1990). And it's that conflict, that intensity of experience, which makes for compelling stories, and attracts avid readers and concerned citizens. Here, too, conflict fuels struggle, makes people clash and come together and demand their rights. Political confrontations of this nature, Marx knew, get ultimately sanctioned by *force*: "The matter," he

quipped long ago, "resolves itself into a question of the respective powers of the combatants" (Marx 1975: 74). It's only, then, through organizing and campaigning and struggle – individual and collective struggle – invariably out on the street, that people will discover who they are, how much they're really worth, and how much they can take back: businesses and bureaucracies will never give anything up without being forced to. Democracy is seldom about being nice to your opponents.

I am all too aware that this raises a dangerous and bothersome question for Leftists: bereft of dissatisfaction and conflict, what do humans become and how much creative capacity is lost? It's dangerous because this reasoning can be hijacked by the Right who will (and do) claim that inequality and suffering (for certain people anyway) is good insofar as it forces them to struggle. It's bothersome as well, because Left urbanists now have to ask themselves whether a society – particularly an urban society – free from all inner contradictions, visible imperfections, threatening disorders, and desperate strivings, isn't so much possible as *desirable*. Maybe it's this incessant wrestling against societal defects and injustices that – inner and outer perils and traumas notwithstanding – enables us to feel more alive and makes us more complete human beings. Maybe it isn't *despite* these traumas and perils but *precisely because* of them that we get a zest for life?

Flexible Marxism can still provide zest for life, can still be a veritable adventure of the mind and body, can still define the breadth and depth of the radical battlefield, dialectically pinpointing the inner connections and contradictions between the economy and politics, between urbanization and urbanism, between thought and action. Crucially, too, it can also show ways *into* these contradictions while *highlighting the contradictions worth keeping and nourishing*. This emphasis on nourishing certain contradictions has to be the key difference between 1990s urban Marxism and its 1970s forebear. Here, too, Marxism now has to discern how patient negotiations and dialogs can be established with cultural theorists, feminists, antiracists, postcolonialists and those expressing affinity-group concerns, while insisting that political economy still matters a great deal in social life. Then, perhaps, it will be possible to devise ways for developing spiritually alive cities with exciting and differentiated public spaces, open to conflict and debate and which face up to their troubles and sufferings squarely and fairly.

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