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Between us in the city: materiality, subjectivity and community in the era of global urbanization

Abstract

This paper considers the conceptual challenges for subjectivity and community in an era of global urbanisation. The urban environment comprises a complex assemblage of human and non-human entities. Urban political subjectivity is thus constituted by a distinctive relation with materiality. This reconceptualisation of the subject comprises a challenge to the classical morphology that has underpinned conceptions of citizenship and community. This morphology has rested on notions of autonomy that are predicated on a separability of the agent from context and community. Global urbanisation challenges the traditional conception of the urban subject as an autonomous citizen. In contrast to classical political morphologies I contend, via Jean-Luc Nancy’s account of the reticulated multiplicity of being singular plural, that urban political subjectivity is constituted by an ineluctable exposure to alterity that arises through our sharing of that which is ‘between-us’ in the city: the material fabric of the urban environment.

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Stone, glass, concrete & gravel
All we got to keep us together

**Introduction**

In this paper I explore the manner in which global urbanisation poses questions of citizenship and community. In particular, I will examine the proposition that global urbanisation recasts the classical figure of the citizen – imagined by scholars from fields as diverse as philosophy, sociology, political theory and human geography to be an autonomous individual separable from his/her context – as an assemblage composed of human and non-human materials. This recasting of the citizen raises further questions about the community to which the political subject belongs and through which they claim their political qualities. This requires examining the bond taken to be the constitutive dynamic of such community. Community is classically taken to arise out of a bonding of entities which gives rise to something that these entities in and of themselves, or even in gathering in the same place, do not possess. Community thus refers to the entity or dynamic emerging when something is ‘between’ these individuals such that they become a political collectivity. This paper asks what is between-us in the contemporary city.

In what follows I explore the possibility that global urbanisation recasts political subjectivity in three broad movements. Firstly, I address the question of the classical figuring of political subjectivity against which any recasting would be understood: namely in terms of citizenship and community. More specifically, I outline the way in which the city and citizenship are intertwined and examine the similar inextricability of the concepts of citizenship and community. I will contend that the problematic of political subjectivity expressed in the relation between citizen and community is distinctively urban in character. Specifically, citizen and community are one way of figuring to the
relation of a subject to the plurality that characterises urban life. Put differently, we might say it is one way of figuring a distinctly urban way of being-with-others. Being-with-others implies that subjects are not atomised individuals but rather always already related to others. Such a relation implies, however minimally, a bond: something ‘between us’ such that we are related, not atoms. This poses the question of what is between us in the city (and thus constitutive of the plurality recognised to be characteristic of urbanity).

In the second part of the paper I turn to the question of what is between us in the city by exploring the central dynamics of global urbanisation. At the heart of global urbanisation are questions of infrastructure. I explore the role played by infrastructure in the constitution and interrelation of the key dynamics of contemporary urbanisation: metacities and slums. Contemporary urbanity is defined by the manner in which infrastructure is constitutive of distinctive forms of life. As the basis for logistics, communications, or mobility infrastructure (or lack thereof) produces certain forms of subjectivity. Contemporary urban life is thus a complex assemblage of heterogeneous parts, human and non-human. I thus outline the assemblage that articulates urban fabric and city dwellers into a plurality of subjects in the contemporary era of global urbanisation. Since it is infrastructure and the material fabric of cities that articulates subjects into relations with one another, we might argue that these are what is ‘between us’ in the contemporary city. Urban political subjects are thus related through the material fabric of the city that is constitutive of their forms of life. Here I am particularly interested in exploring the manner in which political subjectivity might be recast as a mutual exposure to otherness through a shared relation to urban fabric.

In the final part of the argument I turn to this exposure, or the relation between political subjects that is constituted by the material infrastructures of the contemporary city. I explore the way in which assemblage recasts the classical understanding of the citizen. The notion that urban political subjectivity is constituted as an assemblage which puts subjects in relation through material infrastructure, recasts the traditional conception of the citizen as autonomous and separable from his/her context. Insofar what is between
us in the contemporary city is constitutive of distinctive political subjectivities, political subjectivity and context are rendered mutually constitutive. Traditional conceptions of citizen are thus recast by the assemblage that defines global urbanisation. I explore this recasting by suggesting that we might refigure the classical conception of political subjectivity as a relation of individuals facing one another. Instead of a face to face relation we might understand assemblage as a relation of touch: exposure to otherness at a point of contact or articulation. Understood in this way, global urbanisation recasts the problematics of citizenship and community in the contemporary era.

**Cities and citizenship**

As Holston and Appadurai note (1996, pages 196-7), the city has become the arena in which new claims of citizenship are evolving as transnational flows of wealth, bodies, goods and ideas erode and recast the traditional lineaments of the national citizen. Holston and Appadurai argue that for much of the modern period the citizen has been understood as a political subject shaped by a distinctive relation to the nation-state. Citizenship thus understood comprises a relation according to which rights and responsibilities are outlined in return for recognition by (and usually inclusion in) the nation-state. Such citizenship is a relation that establishes the basis for inclusion in the nation-state, as well as the various mechanisms by which that nation-state might be called on to perform various functions (for example, protection of those not included but nonetheless recognised as political subjects).

Globalisation and urbanisation have, however, eroded the inclusive character of national citizenship, exposing the way in which it is exclusionary whilst simultaneously failing to guarantee citizens’ rights. In the face of transnational mobility, for example, national citizenship seems exclusionary, giving rise to inequalities between citizens and immigrants. Moreover, in the face of rising wealth, the nation fails to protect its most vulnerable citizens, belying the inclusive nature of national citizenship. Under these circumstances the city has become an arena in which social movements contest the meaning of
citizenship, elaborating new ‘redistributive right-claims’ around such issues as ‘housing [and] property’ (Holston and Appadurai, 1996, page 197).

Holston and Appadurai perhaps exaggerate the resurgence of the city as locus of citizenship claims. Indeed, the mutual imbrications of the city and citizenship are longstanding. Most obviously, the city and citizenship share a complex etymological intertwinements evident in the overlapping meanings ascribed to the Latin terms *urbs* and *civitas* (see Haynes, 2007). Where the former captures a sense of aggregation, the latter refers to the political subjectivity associated with urban environments. This relation captures the tension between the sense of the city as an urban mass and the sense of it as a political community. As Europeans increasingly referred to the city in terms of *civitas* rather than *urbs*, political community rather than aggregation, so the city became synonymous with the place and practice of citizenship (see here Weber, 1966).

The city thus became co-extensive with practices and problematics of the citizen, not least the question of the relation of the individual to a wider political plurality, the rights the former might have and the responsibilities these rights conferred. These questions of citizenship have shaped the nature of the polity thought to inhabit and govern the city’s spaces. As Isin (2002) shows, the city is a difference machine in which boundaries including and excluding political subjects from recognition as citizens are constantly produced and negotiated. The character of the city is constituted through the drawing of such boundaries. From the plutocracy of Greek city-states to the democratic struggles over representation in modern nation-states, the city has been the site in and at which questions of who is recognised as citizen are resolved by indicating who is excluded. These struggles are played out in city streets in terms of rights, recognition and obligations.

The city and citizenship have, therefore, been mutually intertwined for much of European modernity. Holston and Appadurai’s claim reaffirms this relation, arguing that the subordination of the city to the nation as a consequence of the rise of the nation state is somewhat temporary. The transnational
dynamics of globalisation are taken to revivify the city as locus of a new series of dynamics that recast or reanimate the problematics of citizenship. As such, then, the city is reasserted as the crucible of the practices and problematics that are constitutive of the category of political subjectivity referred to as citizenship. This, of course, poses the question of what precisely these practices and problematics are.

**Citizenship and community**

At root we might say that the problematics of citizenship revolve around a very urban problem: the relation of an individual to a plural alterity.¹ That is to say, the precise shape of citizenship, the precise contours of the political subjectivity it names, emerges from a negotiation of the plurality constitutive of the experience of city life. Whether it is the question of the rights of the citizen, the jurisdiction of the power guaranteeing these rights, or the obligations of the citizen to both the power guaranteeing its rights as well as the others with whom it coexists, these are all problematics arising out of the relation between individual subjectivity and the plurality associated with the city. Lest we forget, throughout attempts to identify the characteristics of the urban, heterogeneity, or plurality has been the consistent constitutive characteristic that has defined the city (Coward, 2009a, pages 38-39). Cities have been perceived as spaces in which difference proliferates and mixes. First as a place of migration, receiving multiple mobile subjectivities, then as a polis in which agonistic interplay is a constitutive feature, the city is defined by plurality (even if its citizens regularly try to disavow it).

This agonistic interplay could be framed as the problematic of ‘being-with-others’ (Nancy, 1991). For many theorists of citizenship the question of being-with-others translates into a negotiation of the relation of citizenship and community (Walker, 1998). This negotiation entails delineating both the collectivity to which the individual belongs – and which is thus the entity that confers rights and responsibilities – as well as those individuals taken to be

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¹ On the plurality of urban life see Wirth’s classic essay, *Urbanism as a way of Life* (Wirth, 2003).
excluded from such belonging. Community is thus conceived as an agglomeration of substantially identical citizens. It is thus also a demarcation of those said not to share the characteristics of citizens, those excluded from the rights and protections the latter enjoy.

However, plurality entails more than the relation of citizenship and community suggests. That is to say, plurality comprises more than the gathering together of identical subjects and the exclusion of their others. Plurality entails a coexistence of substantially different subjects. It requires the recognition of the mutual imbrications of different political subjects. The classical conception of citizen and community fails to recognise such mutual imbrications. Instead it regards the citizen as a regulative ideal representing the apex of subjectivity. Community thus represents the collective entity which can play an enabling role in realising the full range of rights to which the citizen is entitled. Those excluded from community are taken for various reasons to be unable to accede to this privileged state of political subjectivity. Whether backwardly degenerate or stubbornly other, the question is how to incorporate this alterity into the community of citizens or ward off its influence and protect citizenship rights. The question thus becomes both how can citizens can realise their rights and how their others can be incorporated into the schema of citizenship.

However, as Isin (2002) notes, the citizen is constituted precisely by those subjects excluded from the community of citizenship. As such the citizen and its others are mutually imbricated. Recognising this gives rise to another sense in which plurality might be understood. Where conceptions of the relation between citizenship and community look for the agglomeration of identical subjects, we may say that plurality comprises the recognition that we are constitutively bound to those that are substantially different. The urban community is thus not made up of substantially identical entities, but rather a complex pattern of mutual imbrications. Such a conception of plurality raises, however, the question of what binds subjects to one another such that they are mutually imbricated. Whereas the binding of citizens to one another is a matter of their substantial similarity, the question of being-with-others involves
the articulation together of substantially different political subjects. The question thus arises as to what might be between such subjects such that they are articulated or imbricated in the way suggested. If the city is characterised by such plurality then the question of political subjectivity under conditions of contemporary urbanisation is precisely what lies between subjects such that they are articulated or imbricated together in the way I have described.

The remainder of this essay will explore the question of what is ‘between us in the city’. I will contend that urban modes of existence comprise a plurality bound together by a shared relation to an urban fabric. Moreover, I will contend that an account of the interplay of materiality and subjectivity in the contemporary city will, ultimately, comprise a contestation of the spatial trope of separation that has been at the heart of theories of citizenship. Notions of sovereign (and thus autonomous) citizen-subjects rest on the idea of spatial separation between the constitutive elements of the classical imaginary of scholars of politics. The connectivity, relationality and materiality constitutive of global urbanisation suggests that between us lies surfaces of contact rather than interstitial gaps.

The (infra)structures of global urbanisation

What then are the distinctive patterns of urbanisation – and thus of the urban fabric– that are constitutive of what lies between us in contemporary cities? At the heart of contemporary trends of urbanisation are the intertwined entities of the meta-city and the slum. Both of these entities are defined by a constitutive relationship to the infrastructures that have become central to contemporary urbanity.² Cities, predicated on technical infrastructures of transport, communication, power generation, supply logistics and waste removal tend towards a form of urbanisation referred to by UNHABITAT (2006) as ‘metropolitanisation’. Metropolitanisation is characterised by peri-urbanisation (UNFPA 2007): a dynamic in which urban density falls as infrastructure

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² For a detailed exploration of the range of infrastructures integral to contemporary urbanity see Graham and Marvin (2001)
enables greater interconnection across distance. However, instead of the growth of suburbs around a city centre (i.e., suburbanisation), this dynamic generates a form of urbanisation that fills in the gaps between a number of centres. Large multi-centred sprawls thus emerge in which many urban centres exist under the rubric of the ‘meta-city’. From the Pearl River Delta to the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan Area, metacities are defining the character of urbanisation in the contemporary period.

Metacities are defined by their relation to technical infrastructures that bind ever larger, multi-centred urban regions into city-entities. Roads, public transport, communications, supply logistics, power generation, waste removal are all vital in the constitution of the meta-city from a sprawl of urban centres. This technical infrastructure thus brings about not simply the networking together of a number of distinct entities (i.e., their interconnection across spaces of separation), but rather a blurring of boundaries in which centres are articulated (though not sublimated) into a wider urban entity. The metacity is not simply a sprawl, but rather the articulation together of a number of urban centres to constitute another entity altogether (the metacity is thus not simple aggregation, but something more than the sum of its parts). Thus the metacity is more than a network, though it is predicated on notions of connectivity and mobility.³

Intertwined with the emergence of the metacity, and equally – though negatively – associated with the technical infrastructures that define metropolitanisation, is the growth of what Mike Davis (2006) has referred to as the ‘planet of slums’. Defined by their lack of formal infrastructure and a concomitant absence of security, slums represent the informal urbanisation that has swelled the populations of metacities and, to an extent, driven peri-urbanisation. Not simply marginal, the slum has become a form of urban in-fill that has expanded to fill the various interstices of the multi-centric metacity.

³ The distinction between articulation and aggregation distinguishes metacity from megacity, respectively.
Lacking security of tenure, personal integrity, property, and often devoid of basic infrastructure, slums are the dark matter of the contemporary urban dynamic: central to the articulation of the various centres of the metacity and yet devoid of the infrastructure that defines metropolitanisation (Neuwirth, 2005). It is important, therefore, not to see slums as some sort of anti-urban principle. On the contrary, slums are both central to, and defined as deficient modes of, metropolitanisation. Indeed, discussions of the problems raised by slums revolve around the manner in which infrastructures (and, hence, security) can be consolidated in these regions (cf UNHABITAT 2006). The slum thus does not oppose the city, but rather is part of the dynamic of metropolitan peri-urbanisation, swelling urban populations and provoking the further extension of technical infrastructures.

The infrastructural density characteristic of metropolitanisation is constitutive of a complex ecology of political subjectivity. The metacity dweller is articulated into a complex assemblage of technologies that generate a distinctive form of subjectivity. This assemblage is a heterogeneous combination of human and technological entities and capacities. Several of these assemblages are worth mentioning. Firstly, city life is constituted by a number of logistical assemblages in which metropolitan life is inseparable from the technologies of supply that deliver power, food and goods in consumable form and remove the waste such a process generates (this assemblage is mutually constituted by another through which consumption is shaped by technologies of communication). Nominally the centre of the process, the consumer is rendered into a complex set of relationships between human and material entities: the shopper is thus part of a wider assemblage that includes the trucks/planes that transport goods, the electricity station that lights the supermarket, the PC through which consumption is shaped (and perhaps performed via online ordering).

Secondly, metropolitan life consists of a number of distinctive mobilities.

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4 On the concept of a 'complex ecology of political subjectivity' see Coward (2009a). In general this concept is intended to capture the sense that subjectivity is the product of an assemblage of entities – human and non-human, material and immaterial – that exist in a dynamic state of interplay and reciprocal influence and are thus mutually constitutive of a subjectivity that is greater than the simple sum of its parts. As such this 'complex ecology' is similar to the cyborg outlined by Haraway (1991) or the actant outlined by Latour (1988).
including the mass movement of bodies, the swift movement of information and the precise dispersal of goods, power and waste. The individual worker, then is inseparable (and constituted in and through) a complex assemblage of transport, fibre-optics, copper wire and tunnels. Finally, metropolitanisation is characterised by a number of ways in which presence can be effected at a distance: telephone, video, post.

These various assemblages represent complex ecologies of subjectivity in which the subject emerges as a consequence of the distinct articulation of a number of heterogeneous elements. The subject cannot be understood in terms of the engagement of an autonomous individual with a number of goods and services. On the contrary the subject is a distributed phenomenon that can only be understood by tracing the complex ecologies that are distinctive to metropolitan life.\(^5\)

**Urbanisation and the ontological morphology of assemblage**

The emergence of metacities, slums and complex ecologies of subjectivity exemplify the distinctive constitutive dynamic of global urbanisation: namely the assemblage of heterogeneous entities predicated upon technical infrastructures (or lack thereof). The defining characteristics of contemporary urbanity are thus assemblage and technical infrastructure. Put differently, the subjectivity characteristic of the contemporary city is assembled by and through (infra)structure. It is the urban fabric of the contemporary city that comprises the conduits through which the mobilities that define contemporary subjectivity emerge or the walls in relation to which selves and others are articulated. It is thus the fibre optics, the wires, the roads and the walls of the city that lie between us: that form the articulatory links both in individual instances of subjectivity and in wider relations of such subjects and the plural alterity of the city.

Traditionally, the political subject as bearer of rights, entitlements and duties (e.g., the citizen), has been understood as an autonomous entity roughly

\(^5\) On ‘distributed agency’ see Bennett (2005, page 541)
corresponding with the morphology of the human body. Indeed, the political subject has been conceptualised as an agent executing choices made through a rational faculty (usually implicitly understood as ‘the brain’ or ‘mind’). This rational faculty is embodied in a bio-mechanical entity that provides ways of communicating with, and manipulating, a world that is separate to, but nonetheless the arena of, the individual. This is an entirely anthropocentric understanding of the nature of political subjectivity in which the individual is construed as an entity combining rational faculty and body capable of acting in and on the world (Seckinelgin, 2006; Heidegger, 1993). This entity is roughly analogous with the extremities of the body (i.e., the skin’s surface). On the whole this is a morphology that envisages the human body as an autonomous subject active in, and yet fundamentally separable from, the world.

Contemporary urban assemblages challenge such a morphology, extending the manner in which rationality and embodiment are constituted by virtue of the role played by technical infrastructures in the metropolitan subject. Technical infrastructures are not simply supplemental tools deployed by agents otherwise separable from these entities. Rather technical infrastructures are constitutive elements of complex ecologies of subjectivity (Bennett, 2005a). The subject, or agency, that emerges in, say the use of mobile phones, cannot be rendered into separable parts (other than for analytic purposes). Instead it is a constitutive combination of technical and human to produce something more than the sum of its parts. The subjectivity that emerges does not conform to the traditional model which vests agency in a rational faculty that, through electro-chemical signals, causes the body to move and thus alters the world (by, for example, using a tool in a particular way). Such a model is based on a morphology of centralised and unitary agency in which the agent is ultimately isolated from the world and must negotiate that isolation in order to have an impact upon their surroundings. This morphology is a highly psychologised notion of subjectivity in which the subject is a centralised point of decision-making that acts outward into a world.

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6 I say ‘roughly’ as more sophisticated theories of subjectivity might note ways in which differently enabled bodies include the various prostheses that supplement their capacities.
that, despite being eternally condemned to appearing in, the agent reads themselves as autonomous from. The morphology of metropolitanised subjectivity is, in contrast, highly dispersed, material, and worldly. Emerging from such an observation is a morphology in which subjectivity takes on the appearance of a complex ecology of materials – organic and otherwise. This complex ecology is previously what has been referred to elsewhere as ‘cyborg subjectivity’: not simply the augmentation of the body, but the redistribution (and ultimately transformation) of its capacities (Mitchell, 2003; Gandy, 2005).

Central to the ontological morphology of global urbanisation, therefore, is the narrowing of gaps: and in particular the elision of the gap that separates the autonomous individual from his/her environment. At the core of global urbanity is thus an ontological morphology that radically contests the vision of the world on which previous understandings of political subjectivity have been based. Rather than objects operating (on each other) in a neutral spatial medium, global urbanisation gives rise to an ontology in which the neutral medium disappears and, rather than move in space, the entities under discussion are constituted as assemblages that are articulated together in various relationships. This is not a question of the binding together of otherwise autonomous entities, but the constitution of distinctive subjects by the emergence of new bodies from the various relations established amongst contiguous materials. It is my contention that this transformation of an ontological morphology predicated upon spacing and gaps to one constituted by assemblage and articulation bears witness to the emergence of the ‘reticulated multiplicity’ identified in Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘co-existential analytic’ (Nancy 2000).

**Reconceptualising relationality: not a gap but a shared division**

It is my contention, then, that the urbanisation of global politics represents the negation of a gap or spacing on which theorists of citizenship have traditionally based their ontological schemas. The assemblages of global urbanisation thus transform the relationality on which the ontological schemas of citizenship are predicated. In order to explore this transformation of
relationality, it is worth outlining – albeit briefly – Jean-Luc Nancy's co-existential analytic. In both *The Inoperative Community* and *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy takes co-existence, or being-with, as an ontologically primary dynamic (indeed, he describes it as the cornerstone of a first philosophy). Relations between self and other are thus central to his work. Indeed, he develops Martin Heidegger's notion of *Mitsein*, or being-with, in which the relation of identity and difference, self and other is unavoidable (cf Heidegger, 1962). Nancy thus makes relationality an inalienable aspect of being. It is in the development of this ontological schema that Nancy outlines a conception of relationality in which spacing, or gaps, between related entities are negated giving rise to a form of relationality suitable for understanding global urbanity.

For Nancy, the relation of being-with-others is to be conceptualised as a dynamic of shared divisions, rather than traversed spaces. In *The Inoperative Community* he notes that relationality is classically understood as a matter of individual atoms occurring together in the world (1991, page 4). That is to say, being is conceived in terms of an individuality in which relations with others are construed as a secondary phenomenon arising out of the contingent engagement of the individual with the world. Relationality in such an account is conceived as a connection between two spatially proximate individuals. It is a bond that operates across a distance (however small) ensuring that self and other are empirically interconnected (often in agonistic or conflictual relations) and yet ontologically separate.

This schema is strongest in theories of citizenship predicated on notions of unitary agency and subjectivity. These ontologies share a common disavowal of an ontologically primary relation with alterity and, hence, conceive of relations with others as ties that bind an otherwise unencumbered individual. Relationality is thus conceived of as the crossing of a gap or space. However, even those philosophies that take being-with-others seriously are not immune from treating relationality as a form of spacing and, hence, running the risk of treating alterity as something that can, since it is supplemental to the self and spatially distant (despite geographical proximity) from it, be treated as ancillary or contingent. One might say that this treatment of alterity as
secondary as a consequence of a conceptualisation of relationality in terms of the traversing of a space or gap is the fundamental characteristic of the metaphysics of presence. It is precisely through this motif that alterity can be treated as something separate to be reduced to the status of the same through incorporation.

Nancy (2000, pages 21-26) argues that we should regard relationality as an ontologically primary dynamic. Alterity is constitutive of a sense of self and vice versa. Conceived in this way, relationality becomes a shared division rather than the binding of supposedly separable entities. This shared division can be conceived of as the boundary where the precise extent of self and other is established, the point where self stops and other begins. It is the establishment of this boundary that is the ontologically constitutive moment in any form of existence. But this boundary belongs to neither self nor other: it belongs to both and is thus shared. And yet it also divides. It is thus an inalienable surface of contact at which a relation of division is constituted. It is in this sense that Nancy frames a co-existential analytic in terms of a ‘reticulated multiplicity’ (Nancy, 2000, page 9). Existence comprises a criss-crossing multitude of shared divisions, or boundaries, that – like the reticulations of the scales on snakeskin – constitute a number of singular identities that only gain their ontological identity by virtue of these divisions.7

This multiplicity of intertwined singularities (or a being that is ‘singular plural’) is, moreover, inoperative. Self is always constituted by a shared surface of contact with alterity. Shared divisions thus establish limits to any singular instance of being and prevent it from become a self-contained presence. As such it is impossible for any singularity to present itself as a self-sufficient principle of being. It is impossible, therefore, for any singularity to deny that there are others (and thus other ways of being) in the world. As such then, all notions of presence, all political regimes and ideas, are constantly being unworked by the constitutive inalienability of alterity. No sooner is a political

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7 This sense of criss-crossing is also captured in the concept of ‘the melee’ – also outlined in Being Singular Plural and utilised by Closs-Stephens (2010) in her account of urban citizenship.
ideal given some presence and announced as a self-sufficient principle, than its constitutive relation with alterity (usually a form of exclusion and denial) is noted.

Reticulated multiplicity: articulated elements and singular assemblages

This inoperative, reticulated multiplicity provides a schema for understanding the assemblage in and through infrastructure that characterises global urbanisation. It is important to note that assemblages comprise a distinctive ontological entity. An assemblage is not simply a network in which a series of distinct entities are connected to one another. Such a networking together of otherwise separable entities does not contest the notion that relationality is a dynamic in which autonomous entities connect across some form of spacing. Assemblage, I will contend, represents a negation of such spacing insofar as it comprises the articulation of a number of elements through shared divisions into a singular phenomenon.

In Nancy’s co-existential analytic, shared divisions are relations without spacing. They constitute, therefore, a kind of joint or hinge at which two onta (e.g., self and other) are differentiated, joined and related. That is to say the boundary at which the extent of self and other is delineated is both the differentiation of self from other, the joining of self to other (since the boundary is inalienably mutually constitutive) and the relating of self to other (since one derives meaning in relation to the other). This triple dynamic is what I will refer to as the articulation of elements. It is important to note that the articulation of elements is historically contingent. At any one time the shared division establishes where one elements in an articulation ends and where the other

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8 Cf. Bennett: ‘An assemblage is, first, an ad hoc grouping, a collectivity whose origins are historical and circumstantial, though its contingent status says nothing about its efficacy, which can be quite strong. An assemblage is, second, a living, throbbing grouping whose coherence coexists with energies and countercultures that exceed and confound it. An assemblage is, third, a web with an uneven topography: some of the points at which the trajectories of actants cross each other are more heavily trafficked than others, and thus power is not equally distributed across the assemblage. An assemblage is, fourth, not governed by a central power: no one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the activities of the assemblage. An assemblage, finally, is made up of many types of actants: humans and nonhumans; animals, vegetables, and minerals; nature, culture, and technology.’ (Bennett, 200Saa, page 445)
begins. Over time, such divisions may shift changing the nature of the elements that are articulated together. It is precisely this articulation of elements that gives rise to Nancy’s deployment of the metaphor of the reticulated multiplicity: a plurality marked by multiple criss-crossing boundaries each mutually constitutive of the elements that they differentiate.

Assemblages are thus a set of articulated elements that have a distinctive capacity, capability or agency. As singularities, assemblages are indivisible: attempting to remove an element would alter the gathering on which the assemblage is based. Moreover, since an assemblage is composed of articulated elements, over time as these articulations change so will the nature – or even existence – of the assemblage. Within the assemblage, relationality is a matter of differentiation at shared boundaries and thus is without spacing. Assemblages are not, however, separate entities in their own right. That is, the assemblage is not a way of reintroducing the spaced relationality of the metaphysics of presence through the back door. As (co)existence is a reticulated multiplicity, the assemblage is not lifted out of this ontological schema. If anything the assemblage is identified by a slightly heavier trace around its borders that distinguish its internal elements from those that it shares divisions with. Assemblages are thus consistencies within a greater co-existential framework in which separable entities are simply fictional.

The assemblage thus represents an ontological schema in which relation is understood as a division at a shared surface of contact (or an articulation). As such it is a negation of the spaced understanding of relation that has been traditionally deployed in understandings of citizenship. This schema of articulated elements and singular assemblages is a powerful resource for understanding global urbanisation. In peri-urbanisation, for example, the sprawl of urban development transforms that sense of the urban environment as composed of separable entities into a sense in which a set of elements are articulated at shared boundaries. Metacities represent the gathering together of a set of urban centres in a way that distinguishes them as an area of consistency in a wider urban constellation. As such the metacity is a heavy
line traced around singular area of reticulation. Within the metacity the various centres are not separable entities, but rather are constituted at their shared boundaries. Any change in this articulation would change the singular gathering – or assemblage – that the metacity comprises. Finally, the complex ecology of metropolitan subjectivity represents the articulation of heterogeneous elements to provide singular capabilities and/or agency. The metropolitan subject is a reticulated multiplicity in which human and material elements are constituted as such by their shared divisions and in which the articulation of these elements gives rise to distinctive, singular agencies and thus assemblages.

**Touching not facing: shifting the Levinasian ethical frame**

Asserting the primacy and inalienability of the relationality (that is, of exposure to alterity) inherent to urban assemblages is also a critical tool in recasting the politics of classical accounts of citizenship. It could be argued, however, that precisely such a tool is already provided in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Indeed, Levinas (1989) both establishes relationality as an inalienable fact of being (indeed the first fact of being) and takes this relation to be one of responsibility and thus the basis for a fundamental ethics. Levinas, thus provides a very powerful schema for contesting the classical accounts of autonomous citizenship and noting a fundamental responsibility for others. That said, the Levinasian account rests upon an ontological schema in which the self-other relation is a constituted around a gap or spacing. For Levinas responsibility for the other is constituted in the *face to face* encounter between self and other. In this moment of the face-to-face a gap between self and other can be perceived. Levinas appears to recognise this ontological spacing in his description of the ethical demand made by the other as a projectile dynamic. Although Levinas (1989, page 83) describes this demand as like a ‘shot at point blank range’, there is still the sense in which the relation on which his schema is based is a matter of travel between two mutually constitutive, and yet separate, ontological loci.
In Nancy’s terms, however, the fundamental motif for understanding the relation of self and other is not the face to face encounter, but the gesture of touching.\(^9\) In the face to face encounter we have two entities facing one another, in the touch we have two identities articulated at a shared division. While in the face to face entities are mutually constituted by a reciprocal call across an interstitial gap, in the touch entities unfold from a surface itself composed of indivisible membranes. Indeed, for the touch to be touch there can be no separation. The touch is thus a joint that is both shared and yet divides, the constitutive boundary from which plural entities unfold. It is important to think of touching in terms that are not merely anthropomorphic. While it is tempting to think of the surface at which touching occurs as one of skin on skin, touch comprises much more than this. In the assemblages characteristic of the contemporary city, touching is a hybrid event in which human and non-human join at shared surfaces of contact: where walls tell us about the singularity we are when we dwell in a particular house, or wires expose us to the plural others whose message are carried along them.

While one cannot rest too much interpretive weight on such a play of motifs, it is worth noting that rather than the ethical demand Levinas establishes, an urbanised politics might comprise being ‘in parliament with things’ (Bennett, 2005b). That is to say, it might incorporate Bruno Latour’s insight that the agential assemblages that characterise the contemporary era are characterised by an articulation, or touching, of humans and things. And as such, being human, means being ‘inextricably enmeshed with non-human entities and forces’ (Bennett, 2005b, page 137). Or, rather, being a political subject in the cities of the contemporary global north means being articulated together with vacated, decaying property, or with superfast fibre optics, or with water/electricity pipes (or lack thereof). It is thus to the politics of such a parliament with things and its consequences for conceptions of community (or being-in-common), that I want to turn to by way of conclusion.

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\(^9\) For an extended meditation on the importance of touch in Nancy’s thought see Derrida (2005)
Conclusion: the material politics of citizenship in ‘the time of the city’

Urban political subjectivity thus comprises an articulated, relational assemblage. This assemblage consists of singular subjects comprising hybrid articulations of human and non-human material. These singular subjects are exposed to each other at the boundaries where they meet – the objects around and through which they live their lives. Urbanised political subjectivity thus consists less of citizens and their communities than singularities, the materialities they incorporate and the others to whom they are exposed. Much of this exposure happens precisely at the material surfaces that make up the things between-us in the contemporary city. Walls, houses, trains, fibres are all things that lie between us, things that might be incorporated into many different singular assemblages and thus, as shared entities, the things that remind us of the presence of a plural alterity in the city. It is thus the things of the city – the stone, glass, concrete, wire - which are ‘between us’ in the contemporary city.

This account demonstrates the importance of recognising the materiality that lies ‘between us’. Once recognised, citizenship is transformed from a question about the negotiation between individuals and communities to questions of singularities unfolding around the shared urban fabric that articulates the assemblages of contemporary urban political subjectivity. Indeed this recognition requires a recasting of the classical conceptions of the citizen as autonomous being and of community as either a binding of individuals or a sharing of common essence. While singularities might be said to be bound together by what lies between them, this indebtedness to the materialities of urbanity shatters the autonomy of the citizen’s subject. Political subjects are entangled in multiple assemblages, hybridised in ways that make it impossible to claim autonomy. Moreover, the plurality of the city, the exposure of political

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10 For an extended discussion of ‘the time of the city’ see Shapiro (2010).
11 Cf Van Den Abeele’s comment that, in the English language, community refers both to “the more philologically valid…com + munis (…being bound, obligated or indebted together) and the more folk-etymological…com + unus (…what is together as one)” (Van Den Abbeele, 1991, page xi).
subjects to a plural alterity through the things between-us, shatters the notion of shared substance. Singularities are irreducibly plural sharing only what divides them, only the surfaces that are their constitutive boundaries. And hence, the sense of being in common in the city is otherwise than that proposed by classical models of citizenship and community.

According materiality its constitutive role in the ontology of urbanised global politics has consequences for the classical conception of the relation of citizenship to community. Conceived of as a relation of a bond or common substance between autonomous individuals, community is seen as a collectivity of citizens. Politics is thus resolutely anthropocentric, reduced to questions of the way in which such relations can be negotiated. Indeed, democracy is primarily figured in terms of the discursive negotiation of differences in a shared conversation borne of the association of individuals (cf. Bennett, 2005b, page 136). However, the above analysis, should demonstrate that between us in the city is neither an empty space nor a simply human bond. Rather between us is a surface of contact, a point of articulation, at which heterogeneous elements are assembled into complex ecologies of subjectivity. Between us is the urban fabric – from houses to large technical infrastructures.

The exposure to plural alterity implicit in such political subjectivity entails a different sense of community. Rather than a work of collecting and bonding bodies, community becomes an inoperative exposure to others. That is to say it is a being-in-common with plural others through the things that form the shared surfaces that expose us to that alterity. The things are precisely what we have in common. And yet this means that we must recognise that our being in common consists of a mutual exposure to alterity and thus of the unworking of all ideas of separateness, completeness and sovereignty. As such, then there is no individual citizen and no completed community. These figures are always exposed to other through things and thus always have a constitutive boundary at which they are articulated or joined with their others in an inalienable fashion that undoes any sense they may have of separation or completion. The urban citizen and their community are thus complex
assemblages that have the material fabric of the city – and the plural alterity to which that fabric exposes them - in common.

Of course, such recognition will not recast the existing politics of urban citizenship immediately. However, it may enable us to unlock logics that have been stifled by the classical understandings of citizenship. Primary amongst that which might be unlocked is an understanding of the inseparability of the heterogeneous elements assembled in the contemporary urban environment. Thus the trains blown up by bombers in London and Madrid, the decaying, vacant or repossessed urban fabric of post-crash cities, and the armour and weapons used to ‘police’ the worlds slums, are all important in understanding the political subjects that populate the contemporary metropolis. It is these things that we have ‘in-common’ and which thus constitute our ‘inoperative community’ (Nancy, 1991). Only when we understand that these materialities are constitutive of complex ecologies and assemblages will we understand that the insecurities that characterise the contemporary period and begin to envision pathways to contesting their violent logics.

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