The Tyranny of Rent

Neil Gray

A recent Shelter advert¹ lucidly exposed the obscene rise in house prices by comparing how much domestic household commodity goods would now cost if matched to house price rises. A joint of meat would cost £95.62; a chicken, £47.51; a box of washing powder, £28.53; a jar of coffee, £20.22; a dozen eggs, £9.30, and a bunch of bananas, £7.86. As Shelter argue: we wouldn’t accept these price rises in anything else, so why accept them in housing? Elliot M. Tretter's article 'The Cultures of Capitalism: Glasgow and the Monopoly of Culture' (Workers City, 1995) goes some way to answering how we got to this abject position. Tretter’s work can be seen as a continuation of the critical vein of historical geographical materialism, which has developed since the 1970s. Deeply influenced by the research of urban theorist David Harvey (in turn influenced by the critical writings of Marx, Benjamin, and Lefebvre), this school of critical geography has produced a corpus of materially grounded analyses of the ways in which capital, culture and social relations are both constituted in, and constitute the urban realm. Tretter's article takes as its starting point Harvey’s analysis of monopoly – relating to rents, competition and fixed capital – in order to outline the links between culture, gentrification, and economic valorisation in 1980s Glasgow. While Glasgow is routinely held up as a salutary success story in the boosterist literature of ‘post-industrial’, culture-led urban renewal², Tretter argues that this narrative masks an insidious and destructive raid on the commons: “Glasgow is a primary example of an industrial city that has re-invented itself through the exploitation of its cultural infrastructure” (p.113). Following Harvey, Tretter contends that a precondition for losing the cultural infrastructure of a city is the transformation of elements of cultural distinctiveness as a resource. In order to unpack this proposition in the prism of Harvey’s theoretical insights (the exploitation of a city’s peculiar ‘marks of distinction’) is now ubiquitous. Cities have sought, with highly uneven results, to increase their marketability and brand identity through the promotion of the city and its assets as commodities to investors and private capital (including its labour force, infrastructure and cultural amenities). As part of this generalised process, Tretter emphasises the exploitation of the shared cultural assets of a city (‘the commons’) as a means to promote the revalorisation of prime urban land, and transform culture into an economic resource. In order to unpack this proposition in historically and geographically concrete terms, he assesses the ‘primary example’ of Glasgow through the prism of Harvey's theoretical insights on the political economy of monopoly rent.

Monopoly Rent

“...capitalism cannot do without monopolies and craves the means to assemble them. So the question upon the agenda is how to assemble monopoly powers in a situation where the protections afforded by so-called ‘natural monopolies’ of space and location, and the political protections of national boundaries and tariffs, have been seriously diminished if not eliminated”.

David Harvey³

Harvey begins to answer this question by noting that all forms of landownership that are the basis for the wealth and power of landowners exist as monopolies: they involve exclusive claims to definite portions of the surface of the earth that are not reproducible. However, transformations in time-space compression (“the annihilation of space through time”) have accelerated since the shift from ‘fordist’ to ‘post-fordist’⁴ modes of accumulation via advanced telecommunications and transportation innovations. These innovations have destroyed previously existing spatial barriers and loosened the individual landowners’ monopoly power by putting them in competition with increasingly mobile global competitors. For Harvey, the drive to obtain profit from the cultural capital of cities can be seen as an attempt by landowners and their political allies to re-assert and reclaim monopoly powers in a context of accelerated globalisation. While the source of land rent is derived from a monopoly on land, monopoly rent is distinguished by the ability of a landowner to earn a higher than average rent because of another pre-existing monopoly that exists independently of the monopoly on the land. Harvey specifies location and scarcity as the two chief sources of monopoly rent.

• Location: The locational source is related to the centrality of the land to a highly concentrated activity of economic capture such as a transport or communication network, or a financial center or shopping precinct. This is an indirect form of monopoly rent. A premium for the land will be paid in this case for its accessibility and for the commodities and services produced therefrom.

• Scarcity: In the case of scarcity the inimitable qualities of a resource are directly traded upon (for instance a vineyard, prime real-estate location or work of art). Here the uniqueness and specificity of the asset forms the basis for monopoly prices. Investing in a city’s cultural infrastructure is so desirable, Harvey argues, because culture distinctiveness is always embedded in a place and therefore provides the potential for landowners to garner extra rental income on top of an average differential rent. A distinct cultural infrastructure is thus the source of additional monopoly rents if imaginatively marketed in the ‘pre-profit’ realm.

Moreover, in Harvey’s schema, ‘free’ amenities held in common come to be valued for their ability to fetch monopoly rents. While many of the assets that he discusses fetch a monopoly price, many, such as parks, museums, monuments and scenic areas do not. Yet these ostensibly ‘free’ resources still provide a potential source of monopoly rent for adjacent land and property owners.

Extracting Value From The City: Basic Banalities

“There is a politics of space, because space is political.”

Henri Lefebvre⁵

“With the disappearance of local manufacturing industries and periodic crises in government and finance, culture is more and more the business of cities – the basis of their tourist attractions and their unique, competitive edge”.

Sharon Zukin, 1995

Despite all the evidence to the contrary⁶, culture is still presumed to play a positive economic role in the fortune of cities globally. A common assumption is that each city contains a stock of physical, social and cultural assets that are economically exploitable. The widespread erosion of the economic and fiscal base of many large cities in the advanced capitalist world since the 1970s has seen a re-orientation of governance from a managerial to an entrepreneurial mode⁷ with an emphasis on exploiting a city’s cultural infrastructure and assets to secure investment and generate economic output. It has led governments and private capital to undertake a series of programmes and strategies to realise and validate these resources. While many city governments of a Keynesian persuasion were once engaged in managing the urban economy with at least a nominal agenda of alleviating inequality through planning and administration of services, urban governments now attempt to follow an explicit growth agenda in partnership with private agencies and non-governmental organisations. Such market-oriented, growth dependent, ‘growth coalitions’ reflect elite interests and typically “show a significant deficit with respect to accountability, representation, and the presence of formal rules of inclusion or participation”⁸.

A major characteristic of this ‘entrepreneurial turn’ is geographically uneven development and inter-city competition. Local growth coalitions routinely stress a fierce struggle with other cities to compete for investment capital. Thus in an increasingly opaque constellation of power and influence cities have justified strategies to stimulate economic growth – by providing subsidies, tax breaks, and other economic incentives – as a means to lure and leverage capital. In the race to enhance the competitive position of the city in relation to other competing cities, the use of localizing strategies (the exploitation of a city’s peculiar ‘marks of distinction’) is now ubiquitous. Cities have sought, with highly uneven results, to increase their marketability and brand identity through the promotion of the city and its assets as commodities to investors and private capital (including its labour force, infrastructure and cultural amenities). As part of this generalised process, Tretter emphasises the exploitation of the shared cultural assets of a city (‘the commons’) as a means to promote the revalorisation of prime urban land, and transform culture into an economic resource. In order to unpack this proposition in historically and geographically concrete terms, he assesses the ‘primary example’ of Glasgow through the prism of Harvey's theoretical insights on the political economy of monopoly rent.

Footnotes:


⁴ Ibid.


due to co-determinant factors such as prestige and status linked to special, localised ‘marks of distinction’ (e.g. a block of apartments overlooking a municipal park, or a shopping centre close to a museum, monument or gallery).

As Tretter notes, the cultural resources and institutions of a city almost always function at the local level as monopolies (each city can host only so many concert halls, museums, theatres, etc), and the monopolistic potential of a city’s cultural assets are routinely traded upon to boost a city’s competitive edge: “Cities trade on their cultural resources in attempts to attract investment, and corporations profit by effectively siphoning off revenue from the exploitation of the popularity of the city’s infrastructure or the uniqueness of a particular cultural tradition” (p.116). But it is not just cultural institutions that have monopolistic potential; the culture of any city is perceived as a monopoly asset because it is not easily exchangeable with the culture of another city. In this vastly reductive sense, any city can be said to have a monopoly over its “cultural heritage” or “way of life” because they are specific to one location (p.116). City culture itself, as abstract and unstable as this concept may be, is open to monopolization because of its unique and non-exchangeable properties; city branding, endemic to the neoliberal city (e.g. ‘Glasgow: Scotland With Style’), is perhaps the most blatant example of the city redefined to the status of a product under the market calculus.

Smiles Better?

Glasgow, as Tretter notes, is a “primary example” of monetary revalorisation. In the early 1980s, Glasgow’s elite started to rid the city of images of monopolistic subsumption. In the early 1980s, Glasgow Action was formed to coordinate efforts to attract investment, and corporations profit by creating a market calculus. “Cities trade on their cultural resources in attempts to attract investment, and corporations profit by effectively siphoning off revenue from the exploitation of the popularity of the city’s infrastructure or the uniqueness of a particular cultural tradition” (p.116). But it is not just cultural institutions that have monopolistic potential; the culture of any city is perceived as a monopoly asset because it is not easily exchangeable with the culture of another city. In this vastly reductive sense, any city can be said to have a monopoly over its “cultural heritage” or “way of life” because they are specific to one location (p.116). City culture itself, as abstract and unstable as this concept may be, is open to monopolization because of its unique and non-exchangeable properties; city branding, endemic to the neoliberal city (e.g. ‘Glasgow: Scotland With Style’), is perhaps the most blatant example of the city redefined to the status of a product under the market calculus.

Glasgow Action formed a strategic partnership with Glasgow District Council (GDC) to ensure that public funds were mobilised on behalf of private partners. Typical of later entrepreneurial private/public growth coalitions, Glasgow Action was almost exclusively composed of local business personalities with direct ties to local banks and other public related institutions. Their agenda unsurprisingly reflected the bias of that constituency. The purpose of Glasgow Action was to “be a vehicle to inject private sector leadership into the growth process” (p.120), stated Chief Executive, David Macdonald. The agency was designed to “recreate Glasgow’s entrepreneurial spirit” and to coordinate and link Glasgow’s urban renewal efforts with a series of private partners.

Private sponsorship was supposed to support community development, but as Robin Boyle noted at the time, this soon turned into a narrow focus on property development: “Profit becomes the goal; the original, much wider, objectives covering the economic and social condition of the city begin to fade”.

In the lead up to the City of Culture festival Glasgow saw a major sub-leased property bubble: conservatives were paid to refurbishment work in the newly-branded ‘Merchant City’ accompanied by new office buildings and refurbishments in other city centre locations such as the Broomielaw (now home to the International Financial Services District, IFSD), the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, and the site of the 1988 National Garden Festival, “all developments heavily underwritten by the SDA and other government agencies”.

The flipside of the ‘boom’ in construction and renovation came in the form of a sharp increase in rents, with city centre rents nearly doubling between 1987 and 1989 alone (p.120). This highly uneven and ambivalent ‘success story’ was attributed to the entrepreneurial vision of the Glasgow City councillors and business leaders whose place-marketing strategies (rather than public subsidy) were said to have provided the necessary stimulus for economic growth. In particular, according to Tretter, the marketing of Glasgow’s Victorian architectural grid, helped landowners and property developers trade on Glasgow’s unique and distinctive cultural qualities and its “new image as a cultural centre” (cited, p.121). Private investment, Tretter argues, was thus primarily stimulated on the back of the pre-existing monopoly arising from the special qualities and ‘marks of distinction’ associated with locational factors (place) – a monopoly held over and above individual monopolies in property and infrastructure.

Tretter maintains that the drive towards monopoly rents in Glasgow was built on the valorisation of Glasgow’s public and distinctive cultural assets as “a tool to promote economic growth” (p.122). He cites a key report by the Museum and Galleries Commission in 1986, which assessed Glasgow’s cultural infrastructure as one of the largest in the UK (p.122). When Scottish local government reorganisation in 1973 made art infrastructure the exclusive domain of district councils – including all capital and revenue expenditures related to the “fine and performing arts” – the GDC were legally sanctioned to exploit Glasgow’s cultural infrastructure for economic growth (p.122). In the run up to the City of Culture year, GDC routinely emphasised the comparative advantage these assets afforded the city in terms of promoting such a goal.

In order to ‘release the value’ of the local authority’s heritable arts and cultural assets, and transform the cultural commons into fixed capital, the GDC introduced privatisation measures in at least two ways in the lead up to and during the City of Culture festival. First, the GDC (hiring Thatcher’s favourite PR company, Saatchi and Saatchi) began to “package and sell the culture of the city as a brand and source of revenue to private investors” (p.123). The City Council gave its private sponsors exclusive usfruct on the European City of Culture brand, featuring them in all brochures and advertising materials. This acceptance of private sponsorship of the arts marked a decisive shift in Council policy to what is now a banality despite its relatively recent and highly contested provenance. For Tretter, Glasgow’s long tradition of not charging people for admission to museums and galleries ended when two museums specifically designed for the City of Culture festival introduced admission fees. The Mclellan Art Galleries (now closed as galleries), entirely funded from the public funds, started charging a fee at the door in 1990. More pertinently for Tretter’s discussion, ‘Glasgow’s Glasgow’, presented by the City Council as the ‘leading exhibition’ of the Year of Culture festival charged a standard admission fee of £3.40. But this was later reduced to £1 when projected attendances fell to less than half the numbers expected. Glasgow’s Glasgow ended up as a “critical and financial disaster” with the City Council eventually losing £4.5 million on the hugely unpopular exhibition (p.124).

The ‘Glasgow’s Glasgow’ exhibition was roundly slated by curators and activists for its efforts to transfer art already on display for free in Glasgow museums to a private ‘for-profit’ corporation. Elspeth King, then the curator of the People’s Palace museum, was an especially vocal critic. For King, the privileging of a private exhibition undermined the already established worth of the People’s Palace and its resonant location on Glasgow Green (an area historically associated with working-class gatherings). She also criticised the exhibition for receiving – unlike the People’s Palace – a seemingly endless supply of public funding; failing to represent the full diversity of Glasgow’s history; and omitting a well-detailed plan for the handling of the objects collected for the exhibition (p.124/125). When King was passed over for the position of Keeper (over ‘Children of the Empire’), she resigned, galvanised by the Workers City group, soon developed the Elspeth King matter into a national issue; part of a wider critique of the Year of Culture per se. For Tretter, the ‘Elspeth King Affair’ symbolise key moments in the battle over the representation of Glasgow during the Year of Culture.

Oppositional Spaces? ‘Merchant City’, or, ‘Workers City’

For Tretter, the ability of city governments and private partners to capture monopoly rents is predicated on the fact that “the images and symbols associated with a city, and particularly its cultural infrastructure, have a clearly defined and stable meaning” (p.118). By creating a market brand, city governments hope to harness the collective symbolic capital of the city in order to compete with other global cities for inward investment. Thus, he argues, by mobilising around the ‘Elspeth King Affair’ the Workers City group challenged the stability of this meaning and offered “an alternative narrative about the proper use of Glasgow’s history and culture that was important to questioning who owned the cultural heritage and legacy of the city” (p.128). But this summary of events, while maintaining a useful corrective to city boosterism, conforms to a somewhat rigid adherence to Harvey’s hypothesis. For Tretter, the monopolisation of Glasgow’s culture in 1990 increased the “sentimental investment” that people made in their locale, enhancing “people’s conscious attachment to Glasgow, their sense of belonging, and their
While the Year of Culture may have instigated a response from the Workers City group, it was far from "sentimental", and far from pivotal in shaping the consciousness of the group. Indeed, historical consciousness was what prompted the Workers City group to choose to challenge the newly invented 'Merchant City' branding that had been applied to the gentrifying area in the east of the city centre as part of the attempt to "recreate Glasgow's entrepreneurial spirit".

The group pointed out that the branding of the 'Merchant City' was a craven attempt to link modern entrepreneurs with those of Glasgow's past - thereby honouring the role of the 'tobacco lords' (who once lived in the area), despite their "deep involvement" in a colonial economy "which could not have functioned without an entrenched and expanding system of slave labour". As James Kelman noted at the time, Glasgow's tobacco traders trafficked in degradation, and generated wealth "by the simple expedient of not paying the price of labour". This critical historical approach (for which they were lambasted) can now be seen as a central legacy, though not the sole merit, of the Workers City group. While city elites have continually attempted to erase Glasgow's history and culture, and indeed - the Workers City group, at the minimum, created "a record of opposition, some other history".

Tretter is right to emphasise this critique, but it was more than just "vocal opposition" or "analysis" (p.128). He suggests that "the more profound" contradiction between the Council's attempts to utilise the Year of Culture and the "perceived injustice" of this endeavour led to Workers City opposition. But cultural 'regeneration' is typically only a small, if important, mainly symbolic part of wider strategies of dispossession" and the Workers City group were well aware of that. A central campaign that the group initiated (which Tretter barely acknowledges) was the battle to save Glasgow Green from privatisation and "development". The Green has long been associated with radical working-class history, and remains to this day a part of the city's 'common good' assets. The group's victory against the Green's privatisation (allegedly为目的) can be seen as one of its central achievements.

The group also practically supported campaigns against pollution in Carmyle and Rutherglen and Action on Asbestos, crucial solidarity work in a city riddled with industrial pollution. Moreover, looking through back issues of The Keele, "a scandal mongering organ" distributed freely and anonymously by the Workers City group, the range of critical work draws attention to the group's campaigns, anti-militarism, housing campaigns, gentrification ("yuppiefication"), council corruption, the routinisation of the steel and oil industries, privatization of common goods assets, governance, and the deleterable health and wealth disparities of a city notorious for these phenomena. It was neither merely event-based, nor limited to the symbolic plane, but contested over a series of class-based economic processes and their underlying contradictions; and this struggle was not merely event-based, nor limited to the management of Glasgow Green campaign clearly shows.

The Rent Devil's All... 

A major flaw in Tretter's argument is the critical lack of evidence he uses to support his otherwise helpful critique of monopoly rent seeking. By curtailing his examples up to the year 1990, although his article was published in 2009), and by restricting his outlook to the role of culture in monopoly, he fails to update the wider processes of monocapitalism that have made the city such a paragon of neoliberal urbanism. Even a brief summary suggests the scale of the city's capitulation to market forces. Most pertinent to Tretter's position is the transfer of the management of Glasgow's entire cultural and leisure services to Culture and Sport Glasgow (CSG), an arm's length body composed of two companies: one limited by guarantee with charitable status, and a 'trading arm' to carry out functions not deemed charitable. For Rebecca Gordon, Nordthin this transfer represents "the wholesale takeover of culture by business interests". The total list of assets transferred, including all community and leisure services in public ownership, encompasses a remarkable diversity of services lost from the public sector. Controversial proposals to allow private companies to develop businesses in the Botanic Gardens and Pollok Park - successfully resisted - suggest the direction ahead; as does a projected wave of industrial action in the face of closures and pay cuts.

Further, City Venues Review further proposes to close over a dozen community facilities, including a library and a swimming pool, and to reduce operating hours for museums and sports facilities. Among other deeply controversial arms length external organisations (ALEOs) that Glasgow City Council has carved out of former city departments are City Building, offering building services (2,200 staff transferred), and Cordia which operates outsourced services contracts for leisure, catering and cleaning (8,792 staff transferred).

Glasgow's common goods, held in the common good fund, have long come under threat from 'mismangement' and lack of accountability, due to a lack of a comprehensive register of assets - others might say the looting of the common good fund is far from accidental. The latest threat to the fund comes from a new ALEO – City Property (Glasgow) LLP – a subsidiary to which the council will be transferring the rights to £140,000 generating commercial properties in exchange for a loan of £120m from Barclays Bank, ostensibly in order to fill a funding black hole. Taking the role of property services, which was formerly part of the City Council's development and regeneration services, City Property (Glasgow) LLP will work at 'arms length' from the City Council in order to "deliver to the market" these public assets.

The ALEO will now be responsible for the management and sale of all Glasgow City Council's non-operational property assets and the management of the Council's major ground leases.

Meanwhile, back at Dundee...
The loan will have to be paid back at an expected average rate of £10m a year for 20 years, costing the City Council £210m to take up the offer, which represents a 66% interest rate over the period. As the interest rates will be reset five years into the deal, there is a considerable risk that the final deal might cost “significantly more than expected”; if so, the risk is partly guaranteed by the council and the costs will be borne by further sales of city council properties to the private sector or an extension of the loan. But it’s not only the ALEO’s who profit: a recent scathing report reveals an “elaborate system of political and personal ‘management’” at work in the ALEO’s, with councillors sharing ‘top-up’ payments of £400,000 – over and above their public salaries – for landing a role on the board on these ever proliferating partnerships, is sure to be on the agenda sooner or later, and we might expect that this will be a new battleground for basic services in the near future.

**Subsidy Junkies and Flexible Friends…**

The Merchant City – the so-called ‘style mile’ – is the most heavily promoted example of Glasgow’s alleged urban renaissance. The ‘Arts Led Property Strategy’[56] the City Council are pursuing in the area has roots in the early ‘90s when public subsidies were directed into the area to re-brand the city centre and pump-prime private property development. In the ‘90s, the area was home to warehouse storage and machinery manufacture, and the regional fruit and vegetable market. These uses were threatened by the proposed southwards expansion of The University of Strathclyde, and, as part of Glasgow’s innovative urban renewal policies, the east flank of a proposed inner ring road. The relocation of the fruit and vegetable market to Blochairn in 1968 precipitated a “crisis” that caused “a ripple or domino effect on a range of related uses and caused up to 80 businesses to cease trading in the area”[57]. Moreover, the University plans failed to materialise, and the ring road plan was abandoned in that form. The planning uncertainties led to blight and eventually demolition orders, and the Merchant City went into further decline over the following decade. By 1980, a third of the property was in Glasgow District Council (GDC) ownership and a third of property was vacant (with the majority of this vacant property owned by GDC). Overall, the physical fabric was neglected, and the area was designated a ‘Special Project Area’ where “active participation by the public sector was necessary to attract new market interest”[58]. Realising the perceived interests in the area, GDC began to offer subsidy packages to stimulate market interest – including conversion grants, ‘positive’ planning controls, and the release of buildings to developers. A more promotional and entrepreneurial approach was being signalled; and, as Jones and Patrick have noted, for hesitant investors, “public subsidy would bridge the gap between a desirable objective and a profitable opportunity”[59]. From 1982 – with Albion Building, Merchant Court and Blackfriars Court – conversions, rehabilitations and new-build gradually began to take shape in the area. These developments were assisted with new planning criteria whose “underlying principle was that of flexibility”[60]. In 1984, with major GDC and Scottish Development Agency (SDA) assistance, the Ingram Square project constructed 239 housing units as part of its comprehensive street block renewal scheme.

Gradually the demography of the area began to shift as buildings were converted to apartments and cultural amenities to attract more ‘affluent young professionals’. The logic of this financial assistance was partly that of ‘pump priming’ a market from which the public-sector would eventually be wise to withdraw, but, unsurprisingly, the private sector developed a taste for such public largesse: “the availability of public finance has perhaps inevitably influenced land values. Potential investors are to be found in many site valuations with the result that the land values have been bid up”[61]. Jones and Patrick summarise their analysis of the Merchant City redevelopment in 1992, stated that the Merchant City – despite such sustained public support – was, “still dependent on public funds and therefore its future relies on the continued support of the public sector”; however, “it would be very difficult for the public sector to withdraw its support without the painful acceptance that the current momentum would fall by the wayside. The conundrum of rising land values and the ongoing need for public assistance is therefore likely to continue”[62]. And indeed it has. Property owners in the Merchant City area continue to see their rents protected and enhanced by public subsidy. Glasgow City Council have made improvements to ‘urban realm’ works worth £10 million[63] – including the laying of Italian porphyry stone “which sparkles when wet and comes in a variety of colour variations [sic]” at a cost of £500,000 in John Street[64]. The Merchant City Townscape Heritage Initiative, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Glasgow City Council and Scottish Enterprise has contributed another £4.5 million between 2000 and the present; while the Merchant City Tourism and Marketing Co-operative Limited (MCTMC) receives public funding from Scottish Enterprise and Visit Scotland to carry on a campaign of unadulterated propaganda for businesses in the area. MCTMC, via public agencies, also promotes the area’s “merchants market”, a market for expensive high-quality produce which opened three months after the bruising closure of the area’s nearby, despite a sustained campaign[65]. In a typical act of historical erasure the new ‘merchants’ market stands over the site of the former fruit and vegetable market relocated to Blochairn.
Rent neither grows from the soil nor emanates from brickwork. The enclosures of public housing, and the privatisation of profit. 

In the Workers City group’s conception of ‘work’ was much more complex than that of workerism as outlined above. The traditional conception of ‘workerism’ should be distinguished first of all from the workerism (Operaiismo) of the Italian autonomous Marxist movement that emerged in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s. Defining itself as ‘autonomous’ from the dominant Italian Communist Party (PCI), the movement was distinguished by its ambivalence to PCI policies and party ideology, as well as its tendency to seek out radical potentials in new forms of class composition in the wider ‘social fabric’. This latter included production and reproduction within and outside the workplace, and comprised, as well as ‘workers’ in the wage-labour relation, the unemployed and those deemed outside the waged work doing housework, caring, family maintenance, etc. the ‘hidden work’ that supports the wage labour relation and capital. While it would be wrong to attribute an autonomist perspective retrospectively to the Workers City group, Faqquhar McLay’s preface to The Reckoning captures the spirit of Workers City writing from 1990 – presents a far from traditional workerist homage to the nobility of manufacturing workers and the unskilled.

“The old jobs are vanishing. Nostalgia for these outmoded forms of production – now a marketable commodity in art and theatre – is surely misplaced. It was hard, miserable toil in deplorable conditions.”

McLay understood that we are all alienated under capitalism and the wage labour relation: “Work has been degraded to the point where it is totally devoid of any meaning outside the consumer values of capitalism”. His anti-productivist critique of “trade union betrayal” and the “pursuit of delusory wage claims” reflects many of the same concerns found in autonomous Marxism:

“Was it right that people’s work should be just another commodity to be bought and sold in the market place? That a person’s chances in life should be determined by the market value of his labour?” That certain groups might have a higher value than that of others? That some people’s labour should have no entitlement to pay at all? While the wages system remains intact all the authoritarian relationships proceeding therefrom will continue to thrive throughout the whole of society, in every job and profession.”

McLay edited The Reckoning, and wrote both the introduction and the preface; we can surely deduce that his views were shared to some extent by the rest of the group. The same ambivalence to wage-labour, for instance, is frequently reflected in James Kelman’s fiction; the striking instability of his working class subjects. Few have full-time work, and when they do, it tends to be low-paid and insecure. Frequently, his chosen subjects are unemployed. Far from refuting a fixed proletarian embedded in a monolithic ‘social fabric’ – A Disaffection, The Busconductor Hines, I, You, Late It was, How Late, for instance – instead explores, among other things, the tension between the uncertain coming into being of social and imaginative lines of flight, and the alienating social and economic relations that tend to repress them. These tensions are explored in detail in the ‘social fabric’ – in work, in benefit offices, in parkland, in pubs and bookies and in the home. Social identity is never restricted to the workplace.

Heni Lefebvre’s influential insight in The Production of Space (1974) was that the “survival of capitalism” no longer depended on production that merely appeared to occur, but instead on the production of space itself, in and through the process of capitalist development. Spatial production is a political instrument that determines the reproduction of social relations of production through the control and hierarchisation of public spaces. There is then, a politics of space, because space is political. With the financialisation of the economy over the past few decades, the link between finance and an urban rentier economy has become more explicit. David Harvey has shown how large-scale urban infrastructural processes (Haussman’s Paris, Robert Moses’ US suburbanisation, post-war public housing, etc) provide a potent “spatial fix” for the dumping of capital’s surplus profit, especially in times of over-accumulation and recession.”

Meanwhile Michael Hudson has shown that most of the US economy is generated by rent-yielding property: “real estate remains the economy’s largest asset, and further analysis shows that land accounts for most of the gains in real estate valuation”. Stock-market speculation is largely a rent-seeking activity as companies are raised for their land or other property income. The
speculation process inflates prices for these assets, making property and financial speculation more attractive than new forms of productive capital formation: “The bulk of this rentier income is not being spent on expanding the means of production or raising living standards. It is plowed back into the purchase of property and financial securities already in place – legal rights and claims for payment extracted from the economy at large” [20].

The property bubble, and the financial crisis it precipitated, is largely a financial phenomenon borne from this form of social looting. Rental incomes are an unproductive “free lunch” garnered from the economy at large, forcing an ever-higher proportion of wages to be spent on rent and basic subsistence, and denying it for more socially useful means.

As Harvey argues, since the urban process is a major channel of surplus use, then struggles over the “Right to The City” can no longer be dismissed as ‘secondary’ in relation to traditional manufacturing struggles. When McLay suggested, in 1990, that groups like Workers City pointed towards the futures he talked of the traditional image of the worker as producer of wealth becoming more problematic every day. Indeed, the manufacturing sector now accounts for only 6% of the Glasgow labour market, while low-paid services work now accounts for 88% of the workforce [30]. As Harvey and Hudson have shown, wealth is more than ever non-productive and non-wealth generating for the vast majority of people. It is perhaps ironic then that the Workers City group could provide a model for a form of politics that isn’t confined to the workplace, fighting for limited gains at work that are stolen away by inflationary price rises at the level of social reproduction. Urban struggles over social reproduction, social space and everyday life, as Lefebvre and theorists from the autonomist Marxist tradition understood, must come to the fore if social gains in the workplace are to be protected at the level of social totality. The Workers City group, while by no means a perfect model [21], overcame narrow specialisations – “the artist”, “the academic”, ‘the worker’, ‘the activist’, ‘the unemployed’ – to form a non-party, political, horizontal, place-based movement ‘from below’ whose arguments resonate more than ever today – despite all the booster talk of today. James D. Young cited Walter Benjamin when he talked in The Reckoning of a low level of historical consciousness being an indispensable part of ruling class control over working people. Remembering Workers City means brushing history against the grain, and bringing the fractious constellations of the past into a critical and productive relationship with the present; Workers City are an image of the future, not of the past.

Notes
1. http://england.shelter.org.uk/home
3. It is less Glasgow’s cultural infrastructure, and more its surplus labour pool and low-wage economy that attracts capital investment to Glasgow. Moreover, as Richard Florida, chief proponent of the ‘creative class’ thesis admits, the cultural pilots of regeneration are entirely dependent on a “supporting infrastructure” of low-wage service workers to satisfy their consumption demands.
6. In The Rise of the Creative Classes, for instance, Richard Florida acknowledges that behind the hyperbole of his creative class theory lies inequality. In fact: “There is a strong correlation between inequality and creativity: the more creative a region is, the more inequality you will find there” [22].
9. The ‘commons’ refers to resources that are collectively owned. This can include everything from land to software. The process by which the commons are transformed into private property is often termed enclosure. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_commons
11. Ibid.
12. Caution is required here: not everywhere is ‘post-fordist’, China and India, for instance, ensure that production continues at the expense of a massive (and massively exploited) workforce.
13. Gerry Mooney correctly notes that cites such as Glasgow are all too frequently orientated presented as “homogeneous locales of common interests” in city branding exercises, yet “Glasgow does not do ‘things’, it is not an agent and it is not ‘Glasgow’ that ‘wants’ or ‘loses’, or that is undergoing a ‘renewal’, but particular (and if recent evidence is anything to go by, fewer) groups of its citizens living in particular parts of the City” [23].
14. The campaign was replete with a Mr Men style ‘Mr Happy’, and the advertising concentrated on, “the ARC market – namely those people who make or influence decisions, particularly of a commercial nature”. http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/en/YourCouncil/PublicRelations/Campaigns/algowomenisbetter.htm
15. For a clear account of the changing UK and Scottish policy context at this time, see, Boyle, R (1990) Partnership in practice: An assessment of public-private collaboration in urban regeneration – a case study of Glasgow Action, Local Government Studies, 15:2, p.17-28
16. “It is noticeable, however, that all were well-connected in the Glasgow and Scottish business community, having numerous inter-locking directorships (particularly in Scottish financial institutions), membership of the local Chamber of Commerce, and the CBI [. .] leadership, control and direction was to be firmly located in the private sector”. Boyle, Ibid. p.22
17. Sir Norman Maclean, for instance, was director of Clydesdale Bank, Director of Edinburgh Fund Managers and Chair UK Distillers, among numerous other roles, while he was Chair of Glasgow Action.
19. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid. (p.50)
27. Sean Damer noted, in 1990, that the ‘Merchant City’ moniker was “a complete invention of environmental consultants. Nobody in Glasgow had heard this term