

The territory and politics of the post-fossil city

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Abstract

This commentary on Hajer and Versteeg's "Imagining the Post-Fossil City" discusses some of the assumptions and implications of the authors' two key formulations: "techniques of futuring" and the "post-fossil city". I begin by scrutinizing the relationship between techniques of futuring and questions of spatial scale. I then unpack the territorial assumptions of the post-fossil city, suggesting that the latter should be situated within broader spatial understandings of the contemporary urban condition. Finally, I discuss the politics of the post-fossil city, with an emphasis on the relationship between corporate-led smart city sustainability schemes and local democratic governance.

Keywords: *Post-fossil city, urban sustainability, urban politics*

Fifteen years ago, Frederic Jameson (2003: 76) famously observed that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism". Less well remembered than the remark itself is that it came in an essay titled "Future City", in which Jameson discusses new, technology-mediated imaginaries of the postmodern city, as witnessed in the work of Rem Koolhaas. Jameson suggests that, in Koolhaas' exploration of the postmodern city, we see "the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" — that the two are intertwined. This intertwining gets to the heart of the question Maarten Hajer and Wytse Versteeg pose in their *Territory, Politics, Governance* annual lecture: "why it is so difficult to think of new possible worlds, to imagine a post-fossil future"? With the exception of the height of the Cold War, it has never been easier than it is today to imagine the end of the world, although now it is not nuclear weapons which threaten us as urgently as the carbon dioxide byproducts of global capitalist urban society. But even if imagining the end of the world is now easy, imagining the end of the systems which threaten to bring about the end of the world remains elusive. In their discussion of "techniques of futuring" and the "post-fossil city", Hajer and Versteeg have proposed some exciting tools for

achieving this vital task. In this brief commentary I explore their idea of techniques of futuring, then raise some questions about the political and territorial implications of the post-fossil city.

Techniques of futuring

We live in an era where urban sustainability is increasingly mobilized as a business opportunity (Greenberg 2018), an era of the greening of the growth machine (While et al. 2004), an era where economic growth and ecological survival are wishfully held to be mutually enforcing instead of contradictory, and an era of branding concepts such as the “sustainable city”, the “green city”, the “eco city”, or the “sustainable smart city”. Paradoxically, this profusion of urban sustainability discourses has rendered the major objective challenge of urban sustainability — dramatically decarbonizing urban society — harder to discern. In other words, we have many — too many? — imaginaries of sustainable cities or green cities, but few of them, when the dust settles, will have contributed to significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

In contrast to the empty-signifier quality of the “sustainable city”, Hajer and Versteeg recognize climate change as the major existential threat to human urban society, and their focus on the “post-fossil city” maintains a tight focus on the necessity for large-scale decarbonization. They argue persuasively that the task of imagining a post-fossil city is vital to the task of creating one, and here they echo a growing set of calls to focus on plausible pathways to low-carbon futures rather than the depth of the threat which climate changes poses. Even as the press emphasizes apocalyptic scenarios of climate catastrophe, consensus is starting to develop among activists and scientists that the key variables in the fight against climate change will be sociopolitical rather than technoscientific — a fact reflected in the latest IPCC report’s discussion of “shared socioeconomic pathways” (Cohen 2018).

Hajer and Versteeg’s contribution to shifting the sociopolitical terrain is a set of ideas for harnessing present-day action to the motivating idea of the post-fossil city. They call these ideas “techniques of futuring”: “practices bringing together actors around one or more imagined futures and through which actors come to share particular orientations for action” (p. 6). In principle, the idea of a “technique of futuring” is very broad, but among four discursive strategies they consider, Hajer and Versteeg conclude

that the most promising is what they call “the experience of alternatives”. This strategy de-emphasizes “cognitive persuasion” about the need for future climate action in favour of apparently small-scale actions which make post-fossil alternatives *affectively* tangible in the present. As an analytical strategy, this recalls the feminist political economy of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), which identified actually-existing alternatives to capitalism as a means of plotting a path towards a post-capitalist future.

Hajer and Versteeg’s emphasis on facilitating the experience of low-carbon life rather than persuading people about the necessity for decarbonizing is perhaps the most exciting aspect of their proposals. In fact, Hajer and Versteeg’s “living lab” approach offers a deceptively radical disagreement with the standard model of socially progressive knowledge production. While critically engaged academics strive to “establish the facts” which will change people’s minds, Hajer and Versteeg’s proposals are premised on the notion that *we have enough facts* about climate change, and experience will change more minds than facts. In this sense, Hajer and Versteeg’s exploration of the difficulty of imagining a post-fossil city reminded me of Henri Lefebvre’s idea of the “blind field”: “What does our blindness look like? We focus attentively on the new field, the urban, but we see it with eyes, with concepts, that were shaped by the practices and theories of industrialization, with a fragmentary analytic tool that was designed during the industrial period and is therefore reductive of the emerging reality” (Lefebvre 2003: 29). Lefebvre’s insight is that the blind field is not simply the thing we fail to notice, it is the thing we are *unable* to notice, because our sight – our analytical lens – is structured by a reality that no longer obtains. The techniques of futuring which Hajer and Versteeg propose will help us imagine the post-fossil city are, in these terms, tools for transcending a sustainability blind field. They suggest that there are resources for achieving the post-fossil city which we cannot see, because fossil fuels blind us, but which we must see. This entails a project not of looking in new places (“establishing the facts”), but of generating new eyes for looking at places we already know about – what they call “imagination as politics” (p. 8).

Hajer and Versteeg assert that techniques of futuring exist on “a scale with two opposites” (p. 9). One of these is large-scale, bureaucratic and anti-democratic organizational practices exemplified by the International Standards Organization (ISO); the other is small-scale, nimble, grassroots initiatives exemplified by the notion of the “living lab”. This opposition is plausible in many respects, but it is also

problematic, inasmuch as it conflates *two* separate oppositions: large-scale versus small-scale, and elite-led versus community-led. While it may generally be true that the most comprehensive, planetary techniques of futuring are products of states, corporations and other elite institutional actors, it seems to me that this fact should not be taken as a premise upon which political strategies can be devised, but rather is fundamentally part of the problem which needs solving. If we need to rely on elite visions of a post-fossil city to achieve large-scale visions of a post-fossil city, we are in deep trouble. What we need, instead, are “global” or “planetary” techniques of futuring which can match the global or planetary scope of the climate crisis, and yet are nonetheless community-produced, and which can provoke or support action to address the specific needs of specific communities.

The parallel case of tactical urbanism offers both inspiration and caution here. Tactical urbanism, also known as “DIY urbanism” (Douglas 2018), is a mostly US-based orientation to urban planning whereby citizens and staffers alike are encouraged to make small-scale, temporary interventions into the built environment which can have outsized public impacts. Characteristic tactical urbanist projects include painting guerrilla bike lanes where no formal ones exist, or creating pop-up plazas in under-utilized paved spaces. While the interventions tend to be quite modest, the philosophy of action is intended to drive more durable changes in both the built and social environments of cities, and many practitioners see tactical urbanism as a progressive challenge to local (neoliberal) governance structures which are both conservative and unresponsive to community needs.

Tactical urbanism and Hajer and Versteeg’s living labs have different objectives (creating more responsive urban governance structures and decarbonizing cities, respectively), but they rest on similar premises of demonstrating that large-scale alternatives are possible by enacting them at small scales first. Critics have noted, however, that tactical urbanism’s disruptive potential seems mainly to have been realized in its *discourse* of disruption rather than its concrete impacts on broader governance structures (Brenner 2015; Mould 2014). What grounds do we have for believing (or hoping?) that Hajer and Versteeg’s techniques of futuring can escape this dynamic, to the extent that they similarly seem primarily rooted in a concept of nimble, small-scale interventions in the face of large-scale problems? Addressing this question is by no means impossible, but it remains to be done.

Sustainable territory, sustainability politics

As a contribution to such an effort, I want to consider two ways we might build upon or extend Hajer and Versteeg's ideas, and, at the risk of cliché, they concern two of the keywords of this journal – “territory” and “politics”. In short, I believe there are some unresolved tensions in the piece concerning the territory and the politics of the post-fossil city. To begin with, we might ask why, in an era of planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid 2015), we should be speaking of the post-fossil *city*, at the expense of broader, more-than-territorial concepts of the urban condition. Even in the expanded regional configuration in which Hajer and Versteeg discuss the post-fossil city, the fact remains that urbanization processes do not simply produce city and regional spaces – they co-produce these spaces with non-city hinterlands and frontiers. Particularly in the context of material and energy flows, considering the city in isolation from its extra-territorial pre- and co-requisites is analytically untenable.

Hajer and Versteeg recognize the interrelation of city and non-city dimensions of urban sustainability, a point which I return to below, but my feeling is that they have not subjected this issue to the scrutiny it deserves with respect to their project of imagining the post-fossil city. Because the concern that urban sustainability is too quickly reduced to the sustainability of the city is not merely an epistemological one. There is, for example, the uncomfortably likely possibility that the post-fossil city will be achieved at the expense of the rest of the world. In North America we need only look to the post-industrial urban sustainability imaginary, according to which affluent cities such as New York and San Francisco are held up as sustainability best practices thanks to their dense downtowns, high public transit use, and generous environmental amenities (Wachsmuth et al. 2016). This particular urban sustainability imaginary, with its characteristic blend of “green” and “grey” sustainability aesthetics, has rapidly established itself as a new global urban policy common sense (Wachsmuth and Angelo 2018). And yet wealthy, post-industrial cities have achieved their local sustainability through two invisible processes of *outsourcing their unsustainability*. First, they have outsourced their unsustainability to poorer manufacturing cities down the global value chain, where New Yorkers' expensive consumer goods – and the corresponding greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants – are produced. Second, they have outsourced their unsustainability to their increasingly impoverished suburbs, where those who cannot afford to pay for expensive downtown environmental amenities live

resource- and pollution-intensive lives (Gould and Lewis 2016). Meanwhile, the resource and energy extraction hinterlands and frontiers which supply the downtowns and suburbs of rich and poor cities alike with their material preconditions are routinely rendered invisible (Arboleda 2016).

In short, a focus on the territorial form of the city-region overdetermines a set of conflicts, relations and processes. We don't just need new imaginaries of the city. We need new urban imaginaries which exceed the city, which put it in its place, which resist the universalizing imperialism of the "urban age" idea while grappling with the realities of a globally interconnected built environment to support human settlements across a whole range of scalar and territorial configurations. Imagining the post-fossil city will actually require imagining a whole bunch of things which do not look much like the city at all. A major imaginative challenge, therefore, is connecting these city and non-city dimensions of the urban fabric.

Hajer and Versteeg gesture at this idea in their discussion of the "2050 - An Energetic Odyssey" project to visualize a low-carbon energy transition for the Netherlands through offshore wind generators. As they discuss, previous research had demonstrated that local initiatives would be insufficient for achieving the carbon reductions necessary for limiting climate change to 2°C, and the project visualized the results of installing 25,000 windmills in the North Sea to meet the energy shortfall. The project apparently succeeded in reframing the ensuing workshops and discussions around the enormity of the task at hand. But I was left wondering what specifically *urban* imaginaries the project provoked. If "local" sustainability requires such large-scale and far-flung investments to be viable, shouldn't this change how we think about the meaning of "local"?

The final point I want to raise concerns the politics of the post-fossil city. Hajer and Versteeg stress the importance of politics, in the sense of a process of contestation and transformation. This is particularly clear in their cogent arguments about the limits to technology- and smart-city-driven approaches to the post-fossil city. As they argue, "in these glossy visualizations, the urban fabric and often conflictuous nature of everyday city life remain hidden from view" (p. 12). What Hajer and Versteeg do not say although I think the implication is present in their text is that smart-city schemes are unlikely to provide a viable pathway to the post-fossil city, in spite of all their rhetoric, and all their plausible claims to technological progress and expertise. This is precisely

because of the *necessity* for conflict in the project of social and urban decarbonization. This is the sense in which the imaginary of the post-fossil city must be political: politics implies conflict, and winners and losers. Looking at the current set of winners and losers of the fossil-fuel economy, it is very likely that the governance of the post-fossil city will not be realized through technological development and expert knowledge, but rather through political action which *empowers the current losers of the fossil-fuel economy and disempowers the winners*.

The fact of the matter is that the corporate vanguard of the smart city requires consent from citizens to convert its expansive and utopian imaginary into actual city-building, and this requirement creates a site for political conflict. The currently unfolding saga of Google's Sidewalk Labs project in Toronto offers a salient example: Google's initial proposal called for the creation of an effectively autonomous neighbourhood on Toronto's waterfront, where basic aspects of municipal governance and service provision would be performed – in a no doubt highly efficient and sustainable fashion – by Sidewalk Labs instead of the elected government. The executive chairman of Alphabet (Google's parent company) remarked that the idea for the initiative came from the company thinking about “all the things you could do if someone would just give us a city and put us in charge” (Dingman 2017). As commentators were quick to point out, this arrangement implied a rather significant democratic deficit (Sadowski 2017), and after citizens, community groups, elected officials, and the media began asking questions about – among other issues – accountability and democratic control, Google returned with a more modest scheme, which is still under consideration.

The extent to which corporate smart-city schemes play a leading role in achieving the post-fossil city is to some degree a question for cities and communities to decide. And here the fable of the frog and the scorpion is helpful. The scorpion asks the frog to carry it across the river, and the frog declines, fearing being stung. But the scorpion protests that stinging the frog would be counter to its own interests, since they would both drown. The frog acquiesces, and halfway through the journey the scorpion stings the frog. As they both sink into the water, the frog asks the scorpion “why did you sting me?”, and the scorpion replies “it is my nature”. An irreducible fact about the corporate smart-city sustainability imaginary is that the corporations leading it do not have the same motivations as the communities which will be expected to carry them across the river.

If we are not going to consent to carrying the scorpion, and instead aspire to articulating positive, community-centred visions of the post-fossil city, there is going to be a struggle. What kind of shared imaginaries will be necessary for building the kind of coalitions we are going to need? Hajer and Versteeg make it clear that these imaginaries will not simply be new visions of the city; while their analysis and proposals draw strongly on urban design, they steer well clear of the design-fetishism trap which sees spatial form as the solution to problems of social process. I suspect these imaginaries will furthermore need to be far broader than “urban”, and also far broader than “environmental”. The “post-fossil city” is a promising starting point.

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