Space is political. Though this may seem self-evident, it is still useful to ask what we mean by politics today, especially in a world so recently diagnosed by some as “post-political.” Let’s also recall that this post-political sentiment spans virtually the entire spectrum of influential opinion at the turn of the millennium, from Right to Left. Iconic at one end is Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis, the claim that the world-history of political antagonism finally came to a conclusion with the defeat of communism by capitalism, as liberal democracy proved to be the last and best of all human worlds.1 A corresponding view is discernible at the other end as well, on the political Left, which found expression in those radical thinkers who revived some old Orwellian motifs (or those of Kafka, Weber, Huxley) to suggest that a certain regime of policing2 or governmental3 has eclipsed what used to be called politics—which for Marx had meant not managing, but changing, the world.

1 Fukuyama (1992) and Orwell (1984) are the two death sentences for history and politics that have been appealed in the court of history by a new sequence of events dating from 1917: the so-called Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, and other un-programmed uprisings in both central and peripheral spaces of the world. Indeed, Alain Badiou’s recent book on these events of the “riots” bears a suggestive name: The Rebirth of History: Striking in this series of mobilizations is the real, imaginary, and symbolic centrality of space to politics—especially the urban space of squares, streets, and neighbourhoods. But this particular fusion of space and politics has also raised some questions concerning the very nature of these rebellions and their possible, unfinished consequences. Were they primarily struggles about urban space, or something else that remains to be named? And how are the necessary lines of political demarcation—between us and them, friend and enemy, oppressed and oppressor—to be drawn through this emergent socio-spatial force field, in which the heart of history is again beating?

The stakes of these questions may be gauged by the haste with which Western mainstream media rushed to represent the Arab Spring as a movement for democracy, while crediting its catalytic agent not so much the assembled masses of Tahrir Square or Gezi Park, but the new social media developed in the US. In short, the story goes, the [the Arab] want to be like us [the West]. So President Obama, after a few days of hesitation while Mubarak’s fate hung in the balance, had no trouble in abruptly declaring his principled solidarity with the rioters in Cairo. An affinity was apparently forged between the West and the Rest that wishes to be the West, on the holy ground of democracy (Tahrir Square) and free speech (Facebook and Twitter): a classic consensus of the so-called international community, symptomatically silent on the actual causes and sentiments of the riots. That this dominant, if not hegemonic, Western representation of the Arab Spring leaves something to be desired for critical consciousness gives us a glimpse of the dangers lurking under the sign of democracy, itself a key weapon in the hands of those with power—and thus, a key issue in the ideological arsenal of imperialism and colonization.

In Western thought, democracy has been unilinearly linked to the city, a grand narrative of progress that proceeds from Athens via John Locke and the American Founding Fathers to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet it is telling that the status of the French Revolution in this account was drastically downgraded following the events of May ’68. From that point on, the Terror anchored to 1793 became the scarring sign of modern revolt against the old order of monarchy and aristocracy. It is also the history of tyranny because “the city has served as the historical battleground for the struggle for freedom without yet having been able to win it.” From this dialectical perspective, the city, or more precisely the process of urbanization as Raymond Williams explicated in his work, appears not as much of the theatre of emancipation, but more as the dream of Marx called “original accumulation.” The city liberates, to be sure, but usually on the orders of the world.*

The French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre was well aware of such asymmetrical confrontations involving the affinities and antagonisms of the urban when he asked: “Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched?” He answered in the negative, arguing against the view of space as a mere container of social relations, and demonstrating in particular the centrality of the production of space for the survival of capital and state. In his socio-spatial dialectic, Lefebvre conceived of the totality of society as a mediated articulation of three levels of social reality: the “global,” or the most general and abstracted level of the logics of capital and state; the most immediate or lived level of the “everyday”; and the vital in-between level of spatial production or the “urban,” which mediates between the first two. It is only within this theory of totality—Lefebvre’s most audacious and significant contribution to critical theory—that his better-known call for the “Right to the City” makes radical political sense, not simply as a call to occupy space, but as a demand for another possible world. Ripped apart from Lefebvre’s holistic and radical standpoint, however, the Right to the City becomes a vacant slogan, one which has been duly appropriated by the proxies of the 1%: the World Bank, the UN and so on. As with democracy, here another question suggests itself: whose right to the city?

In a world where actually existing rights above all mean property rights—the seamless integration of which with basic human rights is the key historical achievement of the West—Marx is again correct when he states: “between equal rights force decides.”

Which affinities and antagonisms can then be considered as decisive for a revolutionary transformation of both space and society? The shared theoretical and political ground between Jacques Rancière and Badiou seems to overlap with Canfora’s re-definition of democracy against the backdrop of its political, economic, and cultural contexts. The question, however, remains: does democracy have the capacity to bring about this kind of change? The socio-spatial contestations of the Arab Spring and Occupy (among others), to the extent they can be called historical events, involve those coming into history of those who did not previously count and therefore did not exist in the prevailing state of affairs. Rather than a vote for bourgeois democracy, Badiou sees in them a possible dictatorship of the inessential.”