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Facing Commodification: Subaltern Tactics in a Working-Class Tokyo Neighbourhood

Nicolas Pinet

Most of us were born in cities, and the conditions of city life have come to be taken for granted and go unperceived. Living in a city commonly means to pay—or have paid—for the house we live in, the food we need, the water we drink, the transportation we use, the electricity and gas we expend. Indeed, there is a close, even consubstantial, link between city and market that is most strongly experienced by newcomers. In his ethnography of the life of Maragoli migrants in Nairobi, Kenya, Motoji Matsuda reports this nostalgic testimony heard from one of these migrants:

> I have stayed here just for money, no other reason. Money is the hero in Nairobi. I pay high rent to our landlord, I buy maize flour and *sukumawiki* (local vegetables) every day. Wherever we go, we must pay expensive fares. All of Nairobi life is money, money, money. But the village is the opposite world. We need no money to lead an ordinary life. No house rent. We get water, *sukumawiki*, and maize from our own compound. If something more is needed, we can easily ask for it from close kin, neighbors and fellow

N. Pinet (✉)
Laboratoire du changement social et politique, Université Paris-Diderot, Paris, France

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villagers. They are all brothers and we help each other in case of need. It is completely different from Nairobi where people think and behave for self-ish reasons. (1998, 318)

In Chiapas, Mexico, a top-down project for the building of 'sustain-able rural cities' has had the same impact on indigenous peasants prompted, sometimes with thinly disguised threats, to relocate in these newly built cities. One of Nuevo Juan de Grijalva's new inhabitants reports that:

Over there, we harvested everything by ourselves. If we wanted fish, we would go to the river and there, we would get it. It didn't cost to buy it, we fished it. I don't know how but we all find a way to live. Here, we can't make it. (Contreras et al. 2011, 150–151)

It is thus through the eyes of newcomers, used to more autonomous forms of life where market only plays a minor role, that we can better apprehend the radical heteronomy of city life with the all-encompassing mediation of money and its correlative all-embracing *commodification*[1] of things, living beings and also persons, through labour (Gorz 2008, 115). Commodification, as a characteristic of urban life, is not at a standstill. It is an ongoing process tied to the continuous research of profit that forms the inner dynamics of capitalism (Gorz 2008, 103–133). This process is not homogeneous, but rather a succession of speeding-up and slowing-down periods, with factors and rhythms that are not necessarily synchro-nised at the different levels—local, national, global—where it occurs.

In Japan, particularly in Tokyo, the 1986–1991 period of 'bubble economy' (バブル景気, *baburukeiki*) was, for land commodification, a time of impressive speeding-up[2] (Aveline-Dubach 1995; Bourdier and Pelletier 2000), followed during the ensuing recession by a slowing down.

During the long-lasting recession of what was called the Lost 10 Years (失われた十年, *ushinawaretajūnen*, 1991–2000) or the Lost 20 Years (失われた二十年, *ushinawaretanijūnen*, 1991–2010), labour became an important target for commodification with a sharp increase in the number of irregular workers (part-time, short-time, and temporary workers). According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's surveys, the

number of irregular workers increased by 87 per cent between 1990 and 2005 (16.3 million in 2005) whereas the number of regular workers decreased by 3 per cent over the same period of time (Shinoda 2008, 147).

The Winter 2008–2009 Toshikoshi Hakenmura (年越し派遣村, 'End of Year Village for temporary workers') installed from December 31, 2008, to January 5, 2009, in Hibiya Park in Tokyo city centre, graphically depicted the social effects land and labour commodification had on affected city dwellers. As Toru Shinoda (2009) explains:

> In recent years, Japanese employment agencies have been dispatching thousands of workers on short-term or temporary contracts to manufacturing companies such as automakers. But in late 2008, many of these contracts were suddenly cancelled as manufacturers responded to the recession by reducing production […]. During the period of their contract, these workers had typically been housed in dormitories for temporary employees. As their contracts were cancelled, the workers were ordered to leave the dormitory. In the current economic climate, the dispatching agency was hardly able to provide new jobs to these unemployed workers. Many soon found themselves indigent, and some were homeless, compelled to sleep on park benches in the cold night. Very few homeless shelters are available in Japan in any case, and because relevant public offices are closed, the holiday season is the hardest time for these homeless. This was the context for the opening of the Toshikoshi Hakenmura.

The Toshikoshi Hakenmura was striking—and for this reason got large media attention—because it succeeded in gathering at the same place unemployed and homeless workers who were otherwise scattered around the city and went unnoticed.

Seventeen years after the Toshikoshi Hakenmura, there are still people living in public or semi-public spaces all around the city, in more or less sophisticated tents or shelters, sometimes in small communities, sometimes on their own. Most of them came to be excluded or marginalised from the labour market[3] and, as a consequence, marginalised from market society, by lack of the financial resources necessary to play the common earning-and-spending market game.

Out of necessity, people living at the margins of the commodified urban society are forced to devise tactics (Certeau 1990) to get along

with, go through or stay away from rampant commodification. They do so from a subaltern and precarious standpoint as they are situated on the underside of the power relations social system. As these practices contest, bypass, or elude—that is, *transform*—unfavourable power relations, they can be called *political* in the broad sense of the word, as I will show with more details a little later. These tactics are the topic of this chapter.

Findings presented here are based on long-term ethnographical fieldwork[4] (2012–2016) through participant observation in a 'working-class' neighbourhood[5] located in the north-east of Tokyo. This neighbourhood can be roughly characterised as including four types of housing: small one- or two-storey individual homes typical of *shitamachi*(下町[6]), the traditional living areas of working-class Japanese people, large public housing complexes, newly developed private condominium buildings, and shelters more or less sturdy and permanent built by the 'homeless' in public or semi-public areas—usually close to toilet facilities.

As these persons have precisely built places they often consider like home, the usual designation—'homeless'—does seem a bit too ethnocentric. I propose thus to use instead the word they use themselves, *nojuku-sha* (野宿者), whose meaning can be roughly translated as 'campers'. Most of the observations presented here have been conducted in two tent communities, one settled in a park and the other along a river.[7]

In this neighbourhood and the areas close by, commodification concerns land as well as public services. Urban redevelopment projects are replacing the older one- or two-storey houses and small factories with residential buildings, whose benefits and delights are regularly advertised through mailing campaigns. Public parks are renovated and their 'residents' expelled. Private (non-free) bike parking spaces are installed in the vicinity of train stations, associated with the growing ban of freely parking in public spaces. Wards[8] are gradually transferring some of the public services they were providing (public libraries, garbage collection) to private entities along lines usually associated with neoliberal governance (Hackworth 2007, 61).

In this chapter, I intend first to sketch out a more precise and grounded definition of the aforementioned 'political practices'. I will then present, through this conceptual lens, the subaltern tactics devised to exercise a right to the city (Lefebvre 2009) without complying with all the rules

that the commodified city usually imposes upon its city dwellers. These tactics can be divided into two categories which are the subject of the second and third part of this text: some aim at getting by in a commodified urban environment through the pursuit of precise and close-to-home goals (securing a place to live or sources of income) while others contribute to build small decommodified spaces in the urban fabric and, by doing so, question *per se* the current advanced state of urban commodification.

Everyday Life and Political Practices

Standing aloof from the tendency to analyse political practices in terms of the sole relations with the institutions of representative democracy, it can be shown, drawing upon analyses proposed by Raymond Aron (2005, 1229–1238), Claude Lefort (2001, 7–9, 19–20) and Manuel Castells (1981, 326–327), that beyond the apparent diversity of uses, the adjective 'political' has two main applications. The first one refers to the specific social space commonly called 'the political sphere', or, to use Pierre Bourdieu's concept, the 'political field' (2000). This is the realm of institutional politics, elections, parties, and government. In this sense, everything that develops an interaction with this sphere, through more (voting) or less (demonstrations) institutionalised means can be called 'political'. But the adjective can also be used to refer to 'the social whole in itself, considered from a certain point of view' (Aron 2005, 1231). What makes the social whole in itself political is the system of power relations that structures it. Feminists from the late 1960s claimed thus that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1970) because of the gendered power relations structuring the private sphere.

Political practices, in the first sense, are usually analysed through the lens of *politicisation*, that is, in terms of the coming closer to the institutional political field. In the second sense, what gets attention is the *politicity* of practices, that is, their ability to transform the system of power relations. Consequently, from this standpoint, a political action is defined as an act that contributes towards a transformation of the power relations system, in a specific point or more globally.[9] This includes

actions such as voting, as this individual act contributes to the transformation of the political sphere through the election of potentially new members of the government—and therefore also, with the implementation of public policies, to the transformation of the social balances of power relations. But it also includes non-institutionalised political actions as in the case of a group of women living in an Argentine working-class neighbourhood who tackles the problem of domestic violence by paying collectively a visit to the husband involved (Dillon 2011). This non-institutionalised political practice allows them to reverse to their benefit the everyday gendered power relations and heighten their chances to be heard and to better their life.

Drawing upon this conceptual work and relating it to the first two years' fieldwork observations (2012–2014), I have built a six-term typology of non-institutionalised subaltern political practices which also constitute six 'tactics' (Certeau 1990, 60–66) to contest, bypass, or elude unfavourable power relations, namely, reversal of power relations, negotiation, bypassing, encroachment, creation of small and often temporary autonomous spaces, and emancipation.[10] The following two years of research (2014–2016) allowed me to test and assess the hermeneutic fecundity of this typology. All these political practices tend to be discreet if not invisible—except for the first one, the only type of political practices able to reverse one state of power relations and, for this reason, by far the most infrequent. They are usually not actions that protagonists will speak about easily, let alone claim. Protagonists can also express what is at stake for them in those sorts of actions without necessarily using the vocabulary of politics. In this case, the practices' qualification—'this is political'—comes from the researcher judging in the eyes of the definition previously given. In other words, I work here with a *materialist* definition of politics, as opposed to a *nominalist* definition, which would hold the qualification of the deeds by their own author as a *sine qua non* of their politicity.

Speaking about *subaltern* political practices indicates that the focus is on political practices that allow in one way or the other to transform the system of power relations towards less domination, that is, that allow in one way or the other to free oneself from such or such subordinate positions in the net of power relations and thus to better one's lot. In the *nojukusha* case, these practices allow them to get loose from economic

domination—at least partly—and to get by without much money in a money-driven urban environment.

Getting by at the Margins of the Commodified Urban Society

While not fully playing the commodities exchange game, *nojukusha* assert and defend their right to the city through a series of goal-oriented political practices.

Reversal of Power Relations

This first type of political practice is probably the most studied, as it is also highly visible. Indeed, one could say that this is the specific object of social movements' analysts (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). It is the realm of 'hard resistance', as opposed to more subdued practices of 'soft resistance' (Matsuda 1998, 22), of which the following types will give plenty of examples. As mentioned above, it is also, except in extraordinary circumstances, the less frequently observed: by definition, revolts, uprisings, and revolutions (Moore 1979; Pinet 2016) are not the everyday lot. As such, if we want to limit ourselves to *nojukusha* mobilisations, examples are few but memorable. Indeed, they are part of the memory of day-workers and/or *nojukusha* fights kept alive by activists, particularly through the projection of documentaries portraying these fights (Satō and Yamaoka 1985; Kimu 2008). Smaller victorious fights against expulsions from a place where *nojukusha* had settled can also be considered as belonging to this type of political practice. The dynamics of reversal work along lines well known to social movements specialists: through different means—sheer number of people confronting the police or the administration, use of media to denounce the issue, and so on—*nojukusha* and activists are able to invert unfavourable power relations to their benefit and transform the situation. But most of the time, and precisely because of the incapacity to build enough power to confront and invert the unfavourable power relations, subalterns tend to mobilise less confrontational tactics—whether through negotiation, bypassing, or encroachment.

How is it possible still to improve one's situation, or to escape from a particularly harmful situation of domination, when you do not have the confrontational power to do so? One has to appeal to tricks and tactics— to *mètis* (Detienne and Vernant 2008, 19). When sheer power is lacking, one can take advantage of opportunities (Certeau 1990, 60–61), of the opponent's weak points and blind spots to try to achieve success.

Negotiation

Negotiation offers a good illustration of the tricks and tactics mobilised. For a lot of *nojukusha* in Tokyo, the recycling of cans, cardboard, and paper is currently a way to make a living. Collected cans or paper are sold to companies who buy them per kilo, with prices changing depending on companies and aluminium market price. Aluminium prices increased through 2013 and 2014 before decreasing in 2015; the recyclers working in the neighbourhood I'm engaged in were getting 108 yen per kilo in April 2013, 170 yen in December 2014, 155 yen in April 2015, and 127 yen at the end of July 2015 with a company that offers good prices and is located close by.

In 2013, a local politician enrolled journalists from a private TV channel to prepare a programme showing the work realised by recyclers and denouncing it as theft. The argument was that the ward had invested large amounts of money in its recycling programme and that the activity of recyclers was driving away resources for their own benefit to the detriment of the ward programme.[11] The evaluation of the recyclers' earnings and, consequently, of the ward losses, was largely exaggerated, as the ward public servants would admit during the meeting mentioned below.

Recyclers supported by activists then went to meet the ward administration sector in charge of sanitation and garbage collection to ask a series of questions. Throughout this meeting, negotiation was constant be it on the number of people admitted for the meeting or on the qualification of the recycling of cans by individuals. I will start by giving a rapid sketch of the meeting dynamics before delineating the tricks and tactics used. As usual in this kind of meeting, the negotiation first had to do with very concrete aspects linked to control mechanisms through the attempt to limit, or impede limits, on the space and time available for the negotiation proper. The public officers asked: 'You are too numerous. Can you

choose some people that will come to the petition desk?' The recyclers, 20 people or so, answered that they were all concerned and therefore they all wanted to attend, but that they would put themselves aside if another person came for inquiry. This time, they won this part of the negotiation and thus were able to impose a power relation quite different than if only a very small group had been able to make its way to the petition desk. The affinities between negotiation and the reversal of power relations analysed above show clearly here: a larger group is able to establish a balance of power tendentially more favourable than a small group. In some other cases, *nojukusha* lost the first negotiation and had to send only three representatives into the ward office.

One of the focuses of the discussion was on the amounts of money quoted in the programme—amounts invested by the ward and amounts earned by the recyclers. They argued that the figures given by the local politician were false and were able to get the public officers' confirmation. Then the talk went on to the core attack of the local politician in the programme—that recycling was theft. The public servants finally made clear that it was not allowed, but that they didn't consider it to be theft. During the course of the discussion, two kinds of claims were made: logical claims and moral claims. One recycler thus argued that a group of women were recycling cans in a neighbourhood next to where they lived and that nobody called them thieves—a *logical* claim, as logic would expect people involved in identical activities to be called identically. All the recyclers expressed their anger at being treated as thieves, whereas they were just working hard and trying to make a living and survive: 'This is not fair.' What is brought to the forefront here is 'the right to live' as the 'first natural right', 'prior and superior to all other public and private rights' (Nicolas 2008, 424). And indeed, negotiation with different public authorities, whether on public space occupation or more punctual issues, strongly relies on the idea of human rights as a higher-level moral claim. Karl Marx, in his series of articles dedicated to the 'Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood' at the Rhine Diet, denounced likewise the Diet's tendency to make 'the right of human beings give way to that of young trees' (1975, 226). In both cases—'theft' of wood and 'theft' of cans—stakes are identical, with detractors denouncing the financial loss that 'thefts' represent and defenders or subjects involved opposing a 'right to

live' and to survive. But, beyond the argument, what must be noted here is that moral claims are a central part of the subaltern political practice we called negotiation precisely because they are claims that supposedly have to be listened to *even if spoken from a subaltern position*: 'If you pretend to respect human rights, as you do in the ward's official website, then you have to take into account this claim.'

The discussion ended with the recyclers and activists saying that if something happened again, they would come again. To this, the officers answered: 'But do not come with so many people', before the recyclers and activists replied: 'We will all come as we are all concerned.'

The details given show first that negotiation is constant, from beginning to end. It also shows that it uses two kinds of weapons. Moral and logical claims are potentially powerful 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985), as they can be made independently of one's social status or power position given that they appeal to values and criteria supposedly shared by all. But moral claims are powerful only insofar as the more powerful side of the power relation is 'taking rights seriously' (Dworkin 1977), that is, as something else than 'formal rights'. Logical claims also require the interlocutors to play fair and recognise the validity of the argument. For these reasons, and as a method to 'encourage' rights enforcement or logical fair play, the combined use of another weapon—the temporary or more long-lasting building of collective power—proves quite useful. As noted above, successful negotiation is often fostered by a certain amount of contention. In the case analysed here, a can recyclers' union has thus been created and it was as a union that recyclers paid a visit to the ward administration.

If the reversal of power relations and the negotiation are, at different degrees, confrontational tactics, bypassing and encroachment are conversely non-confrontational tactics.

Bypassing

When an obstacle cannot be gotten over, one might try to bypass it. Likewise, if specific power relations cannot be outdone or reversed, tactics can sometimes be found to bypass them. A group of *nojukusha* living in a

park—some of them for 20 years—repeatedly fought against expulsion by the ward park administration, which used the park renovation as an opportunity for eviction. In 2012, some months after a first eviction attempt, the park inhabitants were asked to leave before a specified date during the fall. Confrontational tactics and repeated negotiation attempts failed, and one morning, dozens of public officers, private guards and policemen came to proceed with the eviction. As the *nojukusha* tents had been moved some 20 metres away from the place where they had to be evicted, no real expulsion occurred. But fences were built around the corner where the new tent village had been built, isolating it from the park proper. As it will soon become clear, what prevented the ward park administration from evicting the *nojukusha* was the use of bypassing tactics.

The park where the tents were built is mainly under the jurisdiction of the ward administration. But the borders of it, along the private buildings lining the park, are under the prefecture administration (東京都, *Tōkyō-to*). So legally, the ward administration had no power to evict people from places not under its jurisdiction. Another logical claim was made by *nojukusha* and activists. Behind the buildings lining the park, there are various sheds used by inhabitants and companies for storing tools and goods and installed on *Tōkyō-to* land without specific authorisations; it would have been unfair to evict the *nojukusha* tents without evicting these sheds too. If we look closer, logical claims mentioned above and here are at the same time moral claims: as equality is asserted as a key social value, it would not be fair that similar situations should be treated differently. The day the expulsion-turned-into-confinement took place, the community of people living in the park was supported by around 60 sympathisers and activists, who formed a human chain to protect the newly built tents, so confrontation was also present. Still, it probably would not have been successful without the previous use of bypassing.

Encroachment

Encroachment is another non-confrontational tactic, as it rather tries to be as unnoticeable as it can be. What cannot be achieved openly, through contention or legal means, can also be potentially nibbled piecemeal—be

it space, resources or tax evasion. Its low-profile efficiency makes it probably the most widely used subaltern political practice, as it allows benefits to be gained without the potential high cost of the contention-repression pair (Scott 1985, 299, 1990, 190). As such, this tactic has been widely documented, from poaching in early eighteenth-century England (Thompson 1977) to rice tax evasion stratagems devised by peasants of Tokugawa era (1600–1868) Japan (Watanabe 2012, 227), land occupation in twentieth-century Chile (Garcés 2002), 'politics of the belly' in Mobutu's Zaïre (Bayart 2006, 291–292) or the 'silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public' (Bayat 2010, 56), in Middle East cities. Encroachment is usually a silent tactic, but if it happens to be commented upon retrospectively by the 'perpetrators', it tends to be also associated with moral claims asserting one's right to live, dire necessity or even the right to have equal access to public or natural resources. As in the reported case of English poachers, soon to be hanged for the killing of a deer: 'They could scarcely be persuaded that the crime for which they suffered merited death. They said that *the deer were wild beasts, and that the poor, as well as the rich, might lawfully use them*' (Thompson 1977, 162, emphasis mine).

Encroachment is also heavily used by Tokyo *nojukusha*, especially in relation to the occupation of public spaces. Some of their recycling activities, located on the blurred margins of what is allowed and what is not, could also be considered as encroachment: collecting used cans is not clearly allowed, but it is tolerated, as the collection of deadwood in nineteenth-century Rhenany (Marx 1975). Encroachment is a long-winded and unsteady process with steps being taken forward but also backward, as is usually the case with *mètis*-driven tactics (Certeau 1990, 61; Detienne and Vernant 2008, 21). In April 2014, *nojukusha* took advantage of ongoing construction work with the use of fences to settle again under a suspended highway from where they had to leave previously. Because of the fences and construction installations, they could not build tents as they normally do, but were still able to settle in. One month later, there were 10 people installed there. As time passes and the number of residents increases, it becomes more difficult for the ward administration to take action against them. *Nojukusha* know it, and the ward officers know it too. In another spot, under another suspended highway, there

used to be a small village of tents. The ward administration was able to reduce the number of residents to one single person, through, among other means, the offering of free accommodation for a year. When two other tents were built overnight, they were taken down the following day by construction workers sent by the ward administration. Encroachment is a tactic well known by both *nojukusha* and ward officers.

What makes encroachment a powerful tactic for subalterns is, along with the discretion of its small and silent moves, the moral claim it implicitly or explicitly opposes to the other party. It would be easy to dismiss claims made by somebody who would have built an enclosed area in a public park for training his two dogs, as his claim could hardly pretend to any kind of legitimacy. But *nojukusha* who settle in a park out of necessity can *legitimately* claim a basic human right, that of existence, or of an equal 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 2009; Harvey 2012, 3–26). Still, as noted above, the *legitimacy* of this moral claim does not make it powerful enough, *per se*, to oppose any eviction attempts successfully. Nonetheless, it can be a powerful adjuvant to encroaching tactics. Likewise, while encroachment, as other tactics, is not the sole dominion of subalterns, because of their social position, the moral legitimacy of this kind of practice is more readily found in their cases than in others.

These four types of tactics form what could be called the *nojukusha* way to play (with) the hegemonic market game. Since it is dominant, it cannot be discarded, but some rules can be negotiated, circumvented, or discreetly infringed. Another option is to try and play a different kind of game within the general market game through the building of decommodified spaces.

Decommodification and the Building of Autonomy

Being a subaltern amounts to being caught in a system of unfavourable power relations. From this subaltern position, tactics can be devised to free oneself from such or such a situation of domination—through the reversal of power relations, negotiation, bypassing, or encroachment. All these tactics are explicitly or implicitly relational—they are devised in a

constant dialogue with the other half of the power relation. Another type of tactic consists of finding ways out of this overt or covert antagonism, that is, in building autonomous stances outside of these unfavourable power relations. Reversal of power relations is usually punctual and sometimes temporary. *Nojukusha* become only momentarily powerful in specific contentious situations. In fact, the attempt to reverse a specific power relation is *a means to an end*, not an end in itself. It aims notably at making right a situation perceived unfair and unbearable—that jeopardises some basic human needs or sometimes the possibility of life and dignity. The building of autonomous spaces is, on the contrary, *an end in itself*: the means is the end. It aims at extracting oneself from unfavourable power relations into some, always relative, autonomy. Emancipation is likewise a means and an end.

The Building of Autonomous Spaces

In what way can *nojukusha*'s practices be considered as building autonomous spaces at the margins of the commodified urban world? First, *nojukusha* do not pay for rent, water, or electricity, and they rarely use public transportation. Indeed, they install tents usually built with tarpaulins in parks, on riverbanks, sometimes under elevated highways for rain protection—that is, in unbuilt public areas. They tend to choose spots near public toilets and water faucets. In some places, they can also benefit from street or park lighting. Strictly speaking, their use of public facilities and spaces doesn't cost much to the city: lighting is on whether or not they are around, toilets are used by passers-by and cleaned by city employees anyway. They do use more water than passers-by would do, to drink, cook, or wash, but as the water has to be used next to the faucet, or carried, consumption is quite limited and, one could consider, negligible in city budgets. To wash themselves, they can use public baths (*sentō*, 銭湯) for which they either pay or use entrance tickets given by supporting associations. To put it in a nutshell, they are making the most of urban infrastructures, whose maintenance cost is roughly the same whether they use them or not.

Recyclers collect cans, cardboard, and paper, usually by bike, but sometimes—especially in the case of older people—on foot, pushing a

cart in which they stockpile materials. Recyclers' bikes can be distinguished easily, as the original bike's rack is supplemented by a metal grating allowing them to carry more bags of cans. So, compared to more common urban ways of living, *nojukusha* have, out of necessity, relatively autonomous ways of living. They are obviously not outside market society and their income from recycling directly depends, as noted above, from market dynamics. Still, they live on the margin of market society, that is, of urban society, and are able to build, once again *out of necessity*, spaces of relative autonomy.

One of these spaces of autonomy springs from urban agricultural practices, among *nojukusha*, but often found also in the surrounding areas. In Tokyo *shitamachi* neighbourhoods, a lot of people cultivate plants in the streets in front of their house or shop. In some cases, the cultivation can be quite impressive and creative, with various pots or tubs all around the entrance door. The most common crops are cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplants, watermelons, pumpkins, and perilla (*shiso*, 紫蘇), along with a bunch of more decorative varieties. In some cases, especially in areas less densely built, cultivation can be quite extensive—equivalent to small rural market gardens. The difference is that this occurs on taken public spaces that were most frequently only asphalt at the beginning—they have brought the soil and built the tubs or terraces.

Nojukusha do not systematically grow crops, but in places where the possibility exists—riverbanks, parks—they sometimes do, more or less steadfastly. Even in places with different tents and various inhabitants, there are usually one or two people strongly involved and others who have little to no involvement in it. In some places, both winter and summer crops are cultivated, with good results or sometimes with no results. Among the winter crops, the favourite is probably *daikon* (大根), a big white Japanese radish. But in one place, I was also able to observe the growing of Chinese cabbage, radishes, and varieties of Japanese green vegetables (*komatsuna* [小松菜], *shungiku* [春菊]). When spring comes, the favourite crop is probably cucumber, followed by eggplants and watermelons, but in the tent village I know the best, peppers, tomatoes, green peas, corn, chillies as well as a variety of melon (*kin uri*, 金瓜) were also among the crops planted in 2014. Pumpkins were tried in 2013 with no edible results, and were not planted again the following year. Another

attempt with pumpkins was made in the riverside tent village in 2016, with no success either. Varieties of flowers can also be observed seasonally, including tulips, morning glories (*asagao*, 朝顔), and sunflowers. Seeds are collected to be used again the following year.

Why do these agricultural practices create an 'autonomous space'? First, for food, as for the other parts of their existence (housing, access to water), *nojukusha* try to find alternative paths to meet their needs as the dominant market solutions are not within their reach.[12] By doing so, their existences take, out of necessity, a more autonomous turn than most other city dwellers as they do not depend, or depend less, on a series of market middlemen to conduct their life. As suggested already, this autonomy is, in two senses, relative. It is relative because their incomes depend on aluminium market prices and on their recycling activities being tolerated by the city authorities, and the seeds and plants they cultivate are bought for the most part in supermarkets. It is also relative in the sense that their autonomy is paradoxically higher than those of their fellow citizens—but lesser than, for example, Chiapas indigenous peasants before their move to the newly built 'rural cities'. Still, for observers, it acts as a powerful questioning of the dominant way of life, a quiet reminder that:

> There are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be "easily satisfied" either by producing much or desiring little. The familiar conception, the Galbraithean way—based on the concept of market economies—states that man's wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas his means are limited, although they can be improved. Thus, the gap between means and ends can be narrowed by industrial productivity, at least to the point that "urgent goods" become plentiful. But there is also a Zen road to affluence, which states that human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. Adopting the Zen strategy, a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty—with a low standard of living. (Sahlins 2004, 1–2)

Reasoning drawn along similar lines has led outsiders, especially young adults, to come and live in a tent village for a certain amount of time—some have been living there for several years now. For most of the *nojukusha*, living in a tent is not a choice, but a few of them, as well as these

'outsiders', value this lifestyle for various reasons, expressed on occasions, as free use of time, leisure abundance, and freedom from compulsory everyday labour.

Agricultural practices are tied to correlative practices like the exchanges of crops between '*nojukusha* villages' and most notably, gift practices. In the tent village I visit regularly, the cultivated crops are now seen as the dominion of the person who does almost all the agricultural work. He has thus a strong say on what will be done with his production. What is worth noting here is that the first destination of crops is—even before personal consumption—gifts and, more precisely, gifts to people other than fellow 'villagers'. Marcel Mauss's analysis of gift and prestige (Mauss 2007, 139–143) seems quite relevant in this case and helps to understand why outsiders are the privileged recipient of crops: one gets more prestige with a gift to outsiders than with fellow *nojukusha*. As the winter crop harvest was too abundant to be cleared out through gifts to visitors and personal consumption, the question of what to do with the surplus came to the fore—but the 'gardener' never considered selling it. In the end, the crops were offered for free to passers-by and neighbouring shop tenants. Seen from a view-from-above perspective, the configuration is rather funny, as comparatively more well-off passers-by were receiving vegetables grown organically in a park nearby by a master gardener who also happens to live in the same park in a tent. This somewhat paradoxical and uncommon situation serves as a more relational testimony of the decommodification worked by *nojukusha*, beyond more common self-directed practices.

The building of autonomous spaces can also stem from bigger land occupations, like the ones conducted by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, or the Chilean *tomas* in the 1960s and 1970s (Garcés 2002). In all cases, the physical control of space—which can be quite temporary—seems to be decisive in setting up *spaces* for autonomy. In low-income Middle East cities, smaller encroachment practices have, according to Asef Bayat, a twofold goal of redistribution of social goods and opportunities and of attaining autonomy (2010, 59–60). As with *nojukusha*, this last goal is counterbalanced by another need, security:

> In their quest for security, the urban poor are in constant negotiation and vacillation between autonomy and integration. Yet they continue to pursue

autonomy in any possible space available within the integrating structures and processes. (Bayat, 2010, 60)

Because of quite unstable positions, the building of autonomous space can be, and usually is, temporary. As with most subaltern tactics, what is won today can be lost tomorrow. This is what sets emancipation aside in the array of political practices.

Emancipation

Emancipatory practices can be defined as practices allowing people to escape, or to help them in escaping from, one form or the other of subordinated power relations. Structurally similar to the building of autonomies, emancipatory practices differ from it by their temporality: in a nutshell, emancipation is durable autonomy, that is, autonomy combined with a certain form of security. For this reason, they are, along with the reversal of power relations, the less-frequently observed subaltern political practices. Indeed, emancipatory practices allow, at least for the power relation in which one was in a subaltern position, to cease being a subaltern. Successful MST land occupations (*assentamentos*) in Brasil (Bleil 2012) are a good example of this. For landless families, *assentamentos* constitute a series of emancipatory practices that allow them to attain autonomy with a degree of security, particularly if the *assentamento* gets recognition from the State. The challenges that lie ahead in the occupations (Zibechi 2006) make it clear that emancipation is a never-ending process, but, on the specific power relation tied to land access and use, emancipation is a fact. In another, non-subaltern, context, the development of French social housing was also an attempt, through 'social property', to *provide* from the State a certain form of autonomy with security to low-income families who would cease to have to deal with sometimes-abusive landlords (Castel 1999, 499, footnote 1).

Returning to Tokyo *nojukusha*, is it possible to observe emancipatory practices in these quite unstable situations? As emancipation is a long-term process, it is difficult to give a definitive answer after only a few years of observation. As a preliminary result, it can be said that, as noted above

for the reversal of power relations, this type of practice is rare. The closest to emancipatory practices that I was able to observe are *projects* of emancipatory practices. In the *nojukusha* village I usually visit, the two most dedicated gardeners—one being much more dedicated than the other—have both said, at different moments and when the other was not around, that they would like to try to get a plot of land in the neighbouring, less urbanised prefecture to grow vegetables. One of the two gardeners went on reconnaissance by bike but, until now, had not pushed further. He did not go to meet aging farmers who are numerous in the area, even if he talked about doing it.

* * *

Through a focus on *nojukusha* living in Tokyo, I have tried to delineate different types of subaltern political practices impelled by their being faced with urban commodification. Some of them—reversal of power relations, negotiation, bypassing, and encroachment—are a means to an end: the betterment of life situations in a commodified urban setting. The others—building of autonomous spaces, emancipatory practices— are at the same time a means and an end. The majority can be pursued individually or collectively, but the power that the construction of a collective makes available is often a deciding factor to get more durable and extended gains, especially when confrontation is a key factor. Facing commodification, these tactics cannot pretend to some sort of decisive or broad-ranging effect, they are no revolution and are not meant to be so. Still, for the sake of *nojukusha* as well as from a broader perspective, they constitute breaches kept open in the current market-driven city.

Notes

1. 'Commodification' points out the *process* of things, living beings, or persons *being turned into* commodities to which a value is assigned by the market.
2. 'From 1986 to 1987, prices for residential land increased by 95% and those for commercial land increased by 79%' (Sassen 1991, 347).

3. An important proportion of them, at least in the north-east part of Tokyo, used to work as day labourers but as recruitment paths have changed and they got older, they are not able to secure jobs as they used to. Unable to pay the rent for the cheap accommodation they stay in, they are forced to move to the streets.

4. This research was made possible thanks to the support of the Japan Foundation and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS).

5. Finding a satisfactory word to speak about the neighbourhood I'm involved in is quite difficult. Strictly speaking, not all the families living there are working-class families. Some own their houses, which are sometimes two-storey structures. As I focus specifically on an extensive social housing complex situated in the neighbourhood, the word 'working-class' seemed to me the most adequate if we understand it as an equivalent of the French '*quartiers populaires*' or the Spanish '*barrios populares*'. To preserve the inhabitants' anonymity, I do not give more precision here about location.

6. In Tokyo, as well as in other Japanese cities, the *shitamachi* (下町) refers to neighbourhoods situated in the lower parts of the city, in contrast with the upper, more upper-class parts—the *yamanote* (山の手), in Tokyo. In *shitamachi* neighbourhoods, small independent shops and factories (町工場, *machikōba*) were traditionally numerous. It is still the case in some parts of the city, but *machikōba* tend to be replaced by real estate apartment buildings, called *mansions* (マンション), and the small shops have suffered a lot from supermarkets' competition: the age of the shop tenants is an indication that the next generation will probably not follow their path.

7. During the last four years, I visited the park community at least once a week, sometimes more, depending on the circumstances and occasions. All observations have been noted down in a digital field diary from which the details given here are drawn. No formal interviews have been conducted and there is really no need to. After four years, I can just ask the questions that come up. According to the subject, I might get, or not, an answer. I have transcribed fragments of conversations I wanted to keep a trace of, and recorded (audio or video) specific moments as, for example, negotiations and conflicts with the city officers.

8. Tōkyō-to is composed of 23 self-governing special wards (特別区, *-ku* in Japanese)—the city proper—26 cities, 5 towns and 8 villages.

9. As the institutional political field is only one region of the more comprehensive system of power relations<!--Power relations-->, the second meaning of 'political' includes the first.

10. The typology distinguishes for the sake of analysis types of practices that are often mixed up in the real world.
11. Whereas in some other wards, garbage collection is now handled by private companies, it is still managed by public officers in this ward.
12. This holds true also for the furniture or cookware they use, which are usually salvaged goods.

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