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Politicization, postpolitics and the open city: Openness, closedness and the spatialisation of the political

Steve Pile
The Open University, UK

Michael Keith
University of Oxford, UK

Karim Murji
University of West London, UK

John Solomos
University of Warwick, UK

Edanur Yazici
University of Warwick, UK

Susannah Cramer-Greenbaum
University of Warwick, UK

Abstract

The idea of the open city has been used both conceptually and analytically to understand the politics of the city. The contrast between the open city and the closed city relies, in part, upon an understanding of the global systems that enfold cities and, consequently, the politics that are – and are not – afforded cities. Notions such as the postpolitical city depend not on temporality where the city has ceased to be political, but a spatialisation of politics where the (properly) political has become excluded by the closed systems that envelope cities. In this paper, we explore analytical and theoretical responses to the horror of the Grenfell Tower fire to disclose the ways that different critiques of neoliberalism and racial capitalism deploy and rely upon different conceptions of the open and closed systems of the city. Rather than settle for the

Corresponding author:
Steve Pile, Department of Geography, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK.
Email: steve.pile@open.ac.uk

open/closed binary, we seek to understand how different forms of openness and closedness afford/constrain the politicisation (and depoliticization) of city life – and its catastrophes.

Keywords
Open city, politics of alterity, postpolitics, politicization, neoliberalism, Grenfell Tower

Introduction

In this paper, we want to explore how different ideas of openness (and therefore closedness) function as an underpinning for understanding the politics of the city. We start with Richard Sennett's notion of the Open City, which for him functions as a normative principle for understanding good urban design (2013, 2018). In many ways, this idea of the open city – and of openness – can be understood as a standard for urban design, where the openness of vibrant street life is contrasted with the closedness of gated communities or brutalist housing estates (see Pile et al., 2023). More than this, however, Sennett wishes to champion *open* urban planning practices, which value diversity, provisionality and adaptability (amongst other things).

In this vein, Ernwright and Olmstead (2023) have argued that openness (in their terms, porosity) can be used as an analytic capable of revealing power relations in urban design and planning practice (see also Lorne, 2020; or Simone's notion of the surrounds, 2022). In this conception, openness both reveals the interpenetrating geographies of the city and offers a critique of the power relations that might block or thwart multifunctionality, difference, and the capacity for new/better urban forms to be created. This understanding, in many ways, locates politics in the struggle over the open versus the closed city. In addition, however, Sennett also develops an analysis of the open and closed *systems* of the city. This remains normative: for Sennett, open systems are "good", while closed systems are "bad". Yet, in this schema, we can perhaps glimpse the coexistence of both open and closed systems in the city. This hints at a different spatialisation of the political, emergent out of urban systems rather than urban forms. We wish to look a little bit closer at how the political might be differentially entangled with the openness and closedness of city systems, contingent on moments of politicisation. This takes us to the work of Erik Swyngedouw (2009, 2018). Our interest is in how Swyngedouw conceptualizes the political in cities dominated by closed systems.

The idea of the postpolitical might appear at first sight unpromising grounds to look for an account of the political and of processes of politicization. Moreover, while Swyngedouw is interested in political processes that take place in the city, these are not necessarily a product of the city (contrasting strongly with Sennett's focus on urban forms). Yet, what Swyngedouw provides is a conceptual account of the closed system of the city (which Sennett does not), while also indicating how the political might emerge in postpolitical cities. In this understanding, postpolitics is produced through a western liberal consensus, that neutralizes and marginalizes challenges to the social order. This social order is characteristically 'neoliberal', taken as a toxic entanglement of state practices and capitalist social relations. His argument is that the socially excluded and marginal, those outside the social order, can find or create radical spaces for the 'properly political' within the city (Swyngedouw, 2011). For Swyngedouw, the properly political emerges as radical alternative to the social order, which he witnesses in environmental protests, and which just

happen to take place in cities (like Madrid). However, events can also prompt ruptures in the social order that are properly political; for example, events such as riots or protests, but also catastrophic events such as the Grenfell Tower fire in London.

On 14 June 2017, a small fire caused by a faulty fridge-freezer in flat 16 on the 4th floor rapidly spread to engulf the 24-storey Grenfell Tower. The fire started at around 1 a.m. in the morning. The flat's resident was woken by a fire alarm and almost immediately alerted London Fire Brigade. Within 10 minutes of the call, fire fighters were entering the flat and started to douse the kitchen fire with water. Despite this, the fire burned its way through the kitchen window and out into the exterior of the tower. Less than half an hour after the fire started, a rising column of flames was finding its way upwards and around the block of flats, from the sixth to the eighth storey. An evacuation of the building began, but it would not be quick enough. Thick smoke and fire trapped residents in the upper floors, preventing their escape. In the end, the fire caused 72 deaths, mainly of people living above the 14th floor.

Critical responses to the Grenfell Tower catastrophe illuminate both how the social harms of neoliberalism are made tragically manifest and also how the aftermath created a rupture in the social order – enabling the properly political to emerge (however fleetingly). However, these ruptures can be read against the grain of a *closed system* conception either of the social order (Swyngedouw) or the city (Sennett). Perhaps, instead, responses to the fire bear witness to the *coexistence of open systems*, including systems which can be given names such as neoliberalism and racial capitalism, alongside more benign invocations of openness such as sites of difference and diasporic imaginaries. To capture the coexistence of different forms of politicization, we deploy the idea of a *politics of alterity*, as this does not settle down into a neat binary: for openness, against closedness. Rather, the politics of alterity that emerged in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower was (and is) plural, contradictory and indeterminate. Significantly, the different community responses to the tragedy also spatialize the political in different ways – and, importantly, indicate the need to conceptualise the political through a changed understanding of the open city. It is on this point that the paper will conclude.

The politics of the open city

In his discussion of an ethics for the city (the subtitle of his 2018 book *Building and Dwelling*), Sennett creates a dichotomy between the open city and the closed city. This dichotomy is intentionally normative: it defines and opposes the ethical (open, good) city and the unethical (closed, bad) city. This dichotomy enables other conceptual binaries to be generated – and aligned. Thus, the title of the book also functions as a binary, between building and dwelling, between *cité* (a particular place, assembled from experience) and *ville* (the city as a whole, but especially the built environment). These concepts (*cité* and *ville*) are both sides of the debate about what constitutes the "good" city, but also perspectives on what constitutes city life: is it in its buildings or in its forms of dwelling? It might appear, Sennett contends, that the answer would be both.

Yet, Sennett asserts, cities are complex, full of contradictions and difficulties, which require interventions into their material forms. These interventions tend to side either with building or with dwelling – and are rarely able to hold both sides of the city together all at once. In arguing this, it is clear that Sennett's target is dominant forms of architectural design and urban planning that are closed (in different ways) to city dwellers, who consequently end up on the receiving end of bad plans (see also Sendra and Sennett, 2020).

Perhaps the clearest example of the closed city, Sennett believes, is Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* (Sennett 2013; see also 2018: 71–74). Despite being designed on principles of

circulation, lightness, and airiness – and consequently, in principle, seemingly formulated to create an open city – Sennett maintains that, in practice,

> Corbusier's intended destruction of vibrant street life was realized in suburban growth for the middle classes, with the replacement of high streets by monofunctional shopping malls, by gated communities, by schools and hospitals built as isolated campuses. (2013: 2–3)

While Le Corbusier's grand plans materialised in only a few places, Sennett insists that his principles seeped into urban design. Urban planning began to freeze the city into regulations and zones, disabling local determination and the vibrancy of the streets. Indeed, many housing estates across London were built according to Corbusian principles. Significantly, this includes the West Lancaster Estate, of which Grenfell Tower was the anchoring element. Sennett argues that the closed city is characterised by its systems of design, regulation, and spatial control. However, it is also about the material fabric of the city: it is revealed in the tower block, in concrete and in the different kinds of spatial separators (such as motorways, railways, walls and the like) that divide one part of the city from another. The Lancaster West Estate, thus, falls within Sennett's definition of the closed city (see Sennett, 2018: 262–263).

Critically, the closed city is integrated by design. Every part of the city must, therefore, work to make the whole city work. And those parts of the city that do not, or are not integrated, are judged dysfunctional or disruptive – and must somehow be dealt with (2013: 4). The closed city is horrified by disorder, whether material, social, cultural, or political. Later in this paper, in our discussion of the Grenfell Tower catastrophe, we will see that the ideal of the closed city failed on the West Lancaster Estate, with horrific consequences (see below). For now, however, let us tease out how Sennett conceptualizes this as a distinction between the Open and the Closed (as normative ideals against which to judge the "good" city). To begin with, we must be clear that open and closed refer to systems that underpin particular architectural and planning outcomes for the city. Plan Voisin, in this account, is closed *both* as an urban form (building) *and* as a way of city life (dwelling).

For Sennett, the open city 'implies a system for fitting together the odd, the curious, the possible' (2018: 5). The city cannot be broken down into parts. The city, rather, has to be understood all at once, as all its parts interact with one another to create a dynamic open-ended system. This city is vernacular, vanguardist, cosmopolitan: 'a complex place, which means full of contradictions and ambiguities'. This complexity enriches urban life. Clarity, on the other hand, impoverishes city life.

For Sennett, the word open is explicitly political. It aligns, for him, with 'the open society' (p. 7), such that the open city would contain 'many different sorts of peoples; mutual toleration will allow them to live together' (p. 7). The open city would be more equal, more democratic, and give freedom particular value.

> Ethically, an open city would of course tolerate differences and promote equality, but would more specifically free people from the straitjacket of the fixed and the familiar, creating a terrain in which they could experiment and expand their experience. (p. 9)

The open city, moreover, provides a bulwark 'against oppressive regimes of power' (p. 11) by championing the complex, the ambiguous and the uncertain. It opposes the standardization of the *ville* (lived city) by forces such as financial capital, big developers and urban planning. It opposes the closed city – the imposition of closed systems upon the built environment and modes of inhabitation.

The closed city then is defined by its self-containment, by regulation, by simplicity, by thinness – the removal of ambiguity, uncertainty and consequently an open-ended future. It is revealed in urban forms such as 'the office park, the school campus, the residential tower set in a bit of green' as these prevent experimentation. Rather, they embody the ideals of the elite. Therefore, 'the closed *cité* is [...] a problem of values as well as political economy' (p. 11). The closed city is a system that restricts and regulates, limits possibilities, thins and simplifies city life. Thus, the normative distinction between the open and closed city is laminated to a politics of openness. For us, this account resembles strongly, if surprisingly, the concept of the postpolitical, which is primarily understood as a system that restricts and regulates the political and limits its opportunities for radical expression. We are very interested, therefore, in critiques of the postpolitical city, as these will help us understand how we might rethink the closed system of politics in the city. In this shared vein, seeking ways beyond the city as a closed system lies at the heart of the postpolitical critique.

The closed system city, the postpolitical and the political

Sennett's argument creates an ethical and political distinction between the (good) open city and the (bad) closed city. On one side of this distinction is the open city, characterised by improvisation, adaptation, and open-endedness. On the other side, in Sennett's account, the closedness of the closed city is found(ed) both in its urban fabric and in its planning processes. What the closed city lacks, therefore, is both an urban fabric (*ville*, its built form) that enables adaptation, reworking, spontaneity and improvisation, and also the vernacular open-ended experimentation of city life (*cité*, its modes of inhabitation). For us, this regulated and constrained city resembles Swyngedouw's account of the postpolitical city (2009). In both Sennett's and Swyngedouw's accounts, there is a critique of what we can call the closed system city.

The idea of the postpolitical city, as proposed especially by Swyngedouw (2009), draws heavily upon Jacques Rancière's understanding of the political (especially 2001, 2004, 2006). By exploring the idea of the postpolitical, it is possible to see how oppressive regimes of power can be understood as closed systems. And, to understand how closed systems can be challenged or subverted – and, importantly, from where these challenges and subversions might come. The conceptual underpinnings of the postpolitical enable us to see a significant effect of the distinction between the properly political and the postpolitical: it makes certain forms of politics count and other forms not (see also, for example, Beveridge and Koch, 2017; Darling, 2014; McCarthy, 2013). In effect, this distinction produces a very specific narrative about the relationship between the postpolitical and the closed system city. The stake of this is more than understanding how the properly political might take place in the city – it is about the where of the 'properly political' city, whether it is the where of the gaps and fissures in closed systems or perhaps the where of other (open) systems.

In his foundational essay, *The Antimonies of the Postpolitical City*, Swyngedouw instigates a search (with deliberate irony, given the title of the paper) a search for the political city. (In fact, it is the word antimonies that best helps us understand the analytic Swyngedouw develops.) For him, the contemporary political situation is inherently paradoxical. On the one hand, the city affords a democratic space that invites political debate over social, technical, legal, managerial, and practical solutions to environmental and social problems. On the other hand, the nature of the democratic process actually disables political debate precisely because it is focused on social, technical, legal, managerial, and practical solutions. Put another way, the postpolitical city is characterised by consensus, while by contrast the political city is a hotbed of dissensus, which offers the possibility of

radical interventions into the social order. The postpolitical city, then, is not without politics. It is rather that its politics play about upon the terrain of a western liberal democratic hegemony, that instantiates and requires consensus, which disables the possibility that closed system can be thought outside of – and therefore challenged in any meaningful way. This closed system city is the target of Swyngedouw's critique, which is usefully double-sided: against the postpolitical consensus, but for a properly political dissensus.

What Swyngedouw wishes to be able to recognise – and validate – is the properly political gesture (p. 605). From outside the closed system of the postpolitical city, it is possible for communities to erupt into, or interrupt, the social order in ways that challenge the very constitution of the social order itself (Winlow et al., 2015). Intriguingly, Swyngedouw uses a mixed spatial metaphor to describe the way the closed system of the postpolitical city becomes operative (p. 613). On the one hand, he talks of the hollowing out of the political, such that the political is evacuated from political process. Yet, he says this happens on the horizon of democracy. Thus, processes of depoliticization occur both in the centre and at the edges of the social order.

Remember, the focus of Swyngedouw's analysis is the paradoxical constitution of the political. The mixed metaphor of hollowing out at the horizon effectively instigates two forms through which the closed system of the postpolitical city becomes closed. Internally, the closed system enables debate, yet this debate is neutralized by the demand for consensus. Consensus is regulated and ordered, rendering political positions fixed and familiar, operative only within very specific limits. Thus, the system narrows and thins political debate. Yet, the closed system is vulnerable to contestation from those who are "beyond the horizon" of the system: the unincorporated, the marginal. The closed system not only closes down the political internally, it also seeks to exclude or diminish the possibility of challenge from outside the system.

While the postpolitical city seeks to depoliticize dissent, and incorporate it into a consensual political process, there are nonetheless political moments, which present a radical challenge to the political process itself. Thus, Swyngedouw is keen to recognise the "deeply political" that boils up within cities. Focusing on environmental politics, Swyngedouw argues that certain protests reveal a spectrum of social antagonisms, profound disagreements and radical challenges. The threshold for the 'properly political' (following Rancière, 2001) is that disturbances, protests, riots and the like create a radical challenge to the social order. These challenges are social in the sense that they are prompted not by anything peculiar to the city (2009: 604). Rather, the city is a site where the antimonies of the social, economic and political order are fused into a closed system yet where the social, economic and political contradictions and antagonisms of that closed system are most intensely experienced – especially, for Swyngedouw, in their unsustainable and unjust environmental outcomes (2009: 603; also 2010; and, especially, 2018).

Swyngedouw opens his paper, with a bold statement about the nature of the closed system. He asserts that 'there is a hegemonic consensus that no alternative to liberal-global hegemony is possible' (p. 608). On further inspection, the closed hegemonic system has two different sides: on one hand, there is the western liberal democratic process; and, on the other side, there is the political economy of global capitalism. Whilst these are evidently in concert (producing a liberal-global hegemony), it is also possible to see the gaps between liberal democratic processes and global capitalist social relations. Indeed, the constant shift in state responses to political and economic crisis induced by global capitalism – a process that often goes under the banner heading of Neoliberalism (see next section) – indicates that the hegemony is internally contradictory and sharply contested, at specific moments.

It is not, then, that there is no 'properly political' internal to the postpolitical closed system, only that dissent itself is assimilated and circumscribed in ways that pulls its teeth or ensures that it is toothless to begin with. This is achieved by 'policing'. Here, Swyngedouw draws heavily on Rancière's distinction between the police, the political and politics. The social order, in this argument, assigns bodies to a 'proper place', which we can take as both a social and spatial process (Pile, 2021: chapter 1). This assignment is then policed by various agencies, which range from government, through management, to accountancy techniques. (That is, the police are just one mechanism through which the social-spatial order is policed.) Politics is the location of the 'properly political', where the principles of equality are tested by those outside, or ill-fitted to, the social order.

For us, the difference between this account of the closed system of the postpolitical city and Sennett's account of the closed city is illuminating. For sure, Sennett is not interested in defining the properly political or in understanding whether the properly political emerges out of social or political processes in the city. He is focused on how cities get built and how the urban fabric frames modes of dwelling for urbanites. Thus, the closed city is not about the securing of democratic processes, such that they do not suffer radical challenges to the social order, through consensus. Instead, Sennett focuses on the physical ways that parts of the city are cut off from one another, to ensure that (effectively) the elite parts of the city are not disturbed by those who are considered to have no place within the social order (whether by class, race, sexuality, gender, neurodivergence or whatever). This closed system is not, however, secured in the way that the postpolitical city is. Rather, the social and spatial closed order of city is underpinned by hierarchical impositions by oppressive regimes, using architecture, urban planning and socio-technical design techniques.

Here, we have contrasting visions of the closed system of the city. Each relies on a different way of thinking about the outside of the oppressive regimes that structure, and reproduce themselves through, the city. In the postpolitical version, the outside exists in a socially segregated non-space, playing no role in the production of the closed system of the city, except through brief moments of insurrection. In Sennett's closed city, the outside is spatially segregated, allowed access to the elite city via gateways that are heavily policed. Yet, learning from both Sennett and Swyngedouw, it is possible to argue that there are multiple systems ordering the city, and that these can produce different, sometimes paradoxical, forms of openness and closedness – including, as responses to interferences from coexistent systems. It maybe, further, that there are less systemic versions of openness and closedness, too. And, thus, it is possible/likely/necessary that the commitment to a politics of openness has its own limits.

We wonder, therefore, whether the politics of openness is about both how – and from where – people come into community, come into politics, as an open process in an open city. Here, we are not thinking about open versus closed systems, but about how city systems are themselves continually interacting and producing differential spaces and moments of politicization of openness and closedness. Events can often disclose how systems work to produce (social, spatial, political, ideological) forms of openness and closedness. Critically, this is also about how events both reveal and challenge the composition of the open city and its specific arrangements of openness and closedness. One response to the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire has been to interpret it as the inevitable outcome of the slow violence of neoliberal urban policy (especially housing policy). In this view, the Grenfell Tower tragedy takes place within the closed system of neoliberalism, and so reveals both the structuring principles of that system and its injurious, iniquitous social outcomes (see also Apps, 2022).

Responding to Grenfell: the lived reality of the neoliberal city

Urbanists were quick to recognise that Grenfell Tower was not just a tragic accident, but also represented in microcosm the city itself – a tragedy caused by urban processes that structure an urban condition marked by injustice, inequality, poverty, racism, colonialism, and varieties of violence. Thus, for example, David Madden observes, writing only months later in the journal *City*: 'The Grenfell Tower fire is symptomatic of the contemporary urban condition' (2017: 1).

Often, in critiques of the social and urban context for the Grenfell Tower tragedy, neoliberalism is used as a shorthand to describe the contemporary urban condition (drawing on critics such as Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, see 2005 or 2002). In this conception, neoliberalism describes both/either the vast injustices and inequalities contained within urban processes and/or the violences and harms of urban policies, especially around housing, poverty, and austerity. It is worth mentioning that Swyngedouw does not use neoliberalism as a shorthand to describe the political economy of the postpolitical city, preferring instead neoliberal governance and neoliberal capitalism. This implies, as we have suggested above, that the entanglement of governance and capitalism takes specific form under specific circumstances. To be clear, the use of neoliberalism in critiques of the Grenfell Tower tragedy are also indicating a specific regime of urban governance (under global capitalism). For others, the contemporary urban condition is better understood through other terms: for example, another such term is racial capitalism (for debates about this term, see Bhattacharyya, 2019).

Consequently, we are interested in whether neoliberalism or terms such as racial capitalism, even as a shorthand, are equivalents or analogues of a closed system or an oppressive regime of power as Sennett might understand it. In asking this question, we hold onto the possibility that neoliberalism, racial capitalism and the like, are also open systems. If this is the case, then this would interfere with the idea either that the open is the good city or that opposition to oppression comes from outside a system – an idea that we will take a step further in the next section. In discussing the critiques of the contemporary urban condition, our aim cannot be to declare them either inadequate or wrong. We are only suggesting that they evidence forms of open and/or closed geographical world-building through Grenfell Tower. This world-building makes some things highly visible, significant and knowable. However, it also renders other things invisible, insignificant and unknowable.

Our interest is in how the neoliberalism can be presented as a closed system that enfolds, generates and determines the outcome of the Grenfell Tower fire, as an encompassing context that thence frames an understanding of the politics that follow from the event. We believe this produces both a closed understanding of the neoliberal city and an *a priori* hyper-visibilization of anti-neoliberal politics. On the other hand, we are suggesting that in these responses to the Grenfell fire there is also a sense that neoliberal urban governance – the neoliberal city – is an open system, replete with contradictions, open-ended outcomes, ambiguity and indeterminacy. Thus, we focus on the different ways that politicisation is opened-up and closed-down, and also how politicization and depoliticization *take place*.

To begin, let us quickly explore some reactions to the Grenfell Tower tragedy as symptomatic of (critiques of) the neo-liberal urban condition. Typically, Madden argues that the Grenfell Tower catastrophe 'forces us to reckon with' structural inequalities produced by 'class, race, nationality, religion, tenure and other hierarchised statuses' (p. 4), thereby indicating that the realities of class, race, religion, and other hierarchies are what is

symptomatic about the contemporary urban condition. Thus, analyses of Grenfell Tower frame the disaster as symptomatic of the global realities of the neoliberal city. As Madden puts it:

> The [Grenfell] disaster exemplifies the structural violence of urban life in neoliberal capitalist society, where inequality is incorporated into the landscape and infrastructure of the city and reproduced through predominant forms of urban development [. . .] the fire was fed by the broken housing system; the privatisation of local government services; the drive for deregulation no matter the human cost; the racism that perpetuates inferior infrastructure and safety standards for people of colour; and the erasure of voices and interests of working class and poor people from the concerns of the state. (2017: 1–2)

The idea of structural violence in the neoliberal city became a core focus for many (anti-neoliberal) commentators. Like others that followed (see, for example, Tombs, 2020), Cooper and Whyte trace the institutional violence that created conditions for the Grenfell Tower catastrophe to the austerity agenda that arose (in the UK) in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis (following their own work on the violence of austerity, Cooper and Whyte, 2018; see also Tombs, 2019). This situates the Grenfell Tower fire in the reality of neoliberal social and economic policies that respond to the imperatives of (and especially crises within) the global economy. Thus, Cooper and Whyte have a much broader scheme in mind when thinking about the Grenfell Tower fire. They conclude:

> we should have no difficulty at this point in human history in recognising the intimate relationship between violence and politics [. . .] We can only understand what happened at Grenfell as an institutional chain of events, framed by a neo-liberal politics that promotes the withdrawal of health and safety regulation [. . .] that permits institutions to increase the vulnerability of working-class communities in order to create new spaces of accumulation. (p. 7)

Cooper and Whyte build a picture of routine and mundane administrative and bureaucratic decisions, creating a lived reality of violence and harm in innumerable working-class communities against the backdrop of the neo-liberal capitalist city. Stuart Hodkinson, meanwhile, offered that this institutional chain of events was structured by neoliberal housing policy (2019, 2021; see also de Noronha, 2019 and Burgum, 2019). It is important to understand, from this perspective, that the Grenfell Tower tragedy is not an accident: rather, it is an event that was decades in the making. As John Boughton (2018) puts it:

> The fire at Grenfell was, above all, a personal tragedy to its residents and their friends and families. But to many more it symbolised, in devastating fashion, a crisis in social housing. It stood as an awful culmination to deeply damaging policies pursued towards council housing, and the public sector more widely, since 1979 [when Thatcher came to power] (page1).

Thus, whatever its focus, social policy thereby creates the conditions for the consensual reproduction of the neoliberal capitalist city (arguably) (see also MacLeod, 2018). Moreover, Grenfell Tower made it evident that the neoliberalism is also profoundly racialised, coexistent with legacies of Empire and colonialism (Bhattacharyya, 2019). We agree that the entanglements of capital, migration and race frame the open city, producing contingent processes of race-and-place making (Keith et al., forthcoming). From this

perspective, the Grenfell Tower is locatable within the oppressive regimes of power that comprise the neoliberal racial capitalist city. Thus, Ida Danewid observes that

> the racialised nature of global cities exceed the existence of discriminatory employers, lenders and landlords; indeed, rather than neutral playing fields where non-white individuals experience occasional forms of discrimination, global cities are themselves a mechanism through which capital produces raced space. (2020: 3)

The lived reality of the global city is structured by the racial logics of capital: class violence is imbricated with race violence. Further, Danewid observes,

> On the night of the fire, Grenfell was predominantly occupied by London's racialised poor – by Nigerian cleaners, Somali carers, Moroccan drivers and so on. Yet, in post-Grenfell debates about austerity, urban gentrification and social marginalisation, race was either relatively absent or discussed in isolation from the supposedly more fundamental problem of widening class inequality under neoliberalism. (p. 2)

Rather, Grenfell should be set within a context that includes cities 'from London to New York, Mumbai to Cairo, Johannesburg to São Paulo', thereby creating a global reality spread across and through every major city on earth. This reality is structured by the ways that bodies are produced for disposal by capitalism, deploying a toxic blend of neoliberal social policy and racialised social logics, drawing on the ongoing social, cultural and economic inequalities generated by histories and geographies of colonialism and Empire.

Thus, Grenfell becomes symptomatic of a global urban condition, marked by intersecting oppressive regimes of race, capital, colonialism. A closed system that frames and fixes the urban condition, enacts social violence, prompts increasingly unjust and iniquitous outcomes, while disabling political dissent through its neoliberal charms. Yet, these critics are not arguing that cities everywhere are all the same, nor that neoliberalism is a single set of policies, applied in the same way everywhere. Thus, urban analysts are not arguing that Grenfell shows that London is exactly the same as Singapore or Shanghai or Harlem or Mumbai. Rather, the closed system of oppressive regimes produces a highly differentiated outcomes: everywhere gets its own neoliberal city.

Thus, local differences – which created the Grenfell Tower catastrophe – are read against the global lived reality of structures that everywhere produce the particular local manifestation of the neoliberal city (see also Pile, 2023). In this view, Grenfell Tower acts as proof both of the existence of these global capitalist, racial logics, and also of local experience of their violence, their harm, as the particular conjuncture of these general urban processes. Thus, for Danewid,

> The fire that ripped through Grenfell Tower is, from this perspective, part of a much wider cartography of imperial and racial violence. More than a purely domestic problem of widening class inequality under neoliberalism, the makings of Grenfell were inherently global-colonial in character. (p. 17)

What is true of North Kensington, Danewid concludes, is ultimately true of cities everywhere, listing Cape Town, São Paulo, Ferguson, Jakarta and Paris to prove this point. In a way, we are left with a contradiction. On the one hand, there is some kind of global urban condition, that has features in common. These features – or dimensions of oppressive regimes of power – can be named and listed. Neoliberal. Capitalist. Colonial.

Postcolonial. Imperial. Racial. Environmental. On the other hand, each city is a product of the conjuncture of, or intersection between, this oppressive regime. It is the local arrangements that enable a more complex and nuanced urban analysis, aware both of its generalisable global reality and of its particular local manifestation. Yet, how the global can be universal while the local is particular remains opaque. For us, however, this puzzle could be more of a paradox. What Grenfell symbolises, what it was caused by, and who should be considered guilty for the tragedy, invoke different logics and different registers of voice and argument. Thus, rather than seeing "neoliberalism etc." as a global closed system that somehow produces open-ended outcomes, it might be better to think about how neoliberalism etc. are *coexisting open systems*, which are incomplete, limited, indeterminate, unfinished.

We are not arguing that setting of the Grenfell Tower fire within the context of an account of the neoliberal etc. city is somehow wrong-headed – and consequently should be jettisoned and replaced. Rather, we are seeking to emphasize that regimes of oppression (following Sennett) are also open systems (cutting across Sennett). And, that they become operative through their ability to close down or guide the politics of openness (and closedness). Thus, we wish to emphasize the importance of reading the urban condition for the moments of openness and closedness (see also Ernwright and Olmstead, 2023). And, indeed, seeing the Grenfell Tower tragedy as moment where these opennesses and closednesses are both revealed and challenged – yet not quite as Swyngedouw would suggest, through the properly political. Rather, through the (re)politicisation of the previously (de-/un-)politicized. A pivotal term in these processes of (re)politicisation is community, which became the stake, condition and limit of dissent: not arriving, as it were, from outside the system, or in direct opposition to the system, but as an imminent possibility within the incomplete, indeterminate, incoherent open systems of the city. In these processes, we see the significance of *alterity*, of differences that are themselves outside, or define the limit of, of political processes: in some ways, following Swyngedouw, though this might be better seen as the *improperly* political.

Responding to Grenfell: openness and the politics of alterity

Often understood against the backdrop of the global reality of conditions in the neoliberal etc. city (as we have heard), critical urban analysts have wanted to emphasize the strength and passion of the community response to the fire, but also to see within Grenfell protests an already-existing antagonism towards the neoliberal urban condition. Simply put, critics are drawn towards valuing Grenfell protests that articulate anti-neoliberal sentiments and/or those sentiments when expressed in protests. Even so, other critics are more concerned with the nature of the protests themselves and the diverse routes through which unity is constructed by communities brought together not just by grief, loss and trauma, but also by solidarity, empathy and claims to justice. Here, the focus lies upon the lived experiences of urban inequalities and injustices and the practices of dissent and protest that the community generated before and after the fire. In this broader frame, a *politics of alterity* emerges that sits alongside anti-neoliberal protest, yet it is not necessarily directly connected to it or organised around it, and indeed may not be at all in evidence.

To show how this politics of alterity can be witnessed, let us start with Bulley and Brassett's (2021) exploration of the ethics of responsibility that are prompted by the Grenfell Tower fire. For them, this ethics must be set within the broader geographies of community that enfold Grenfell Tower. Therefore, they explore the geographies of inequality that operate within London, but that also stretch into the world in particular ways.

This geography of community is not merely local, nor is it comprised by some undifferentiated global. Rather, for them, the Grenfell Tower catastrophe emerges out of, and is crystallized within, a specific set of locals and globals. As Bulley and Brassett observe, the people of Grenfell came from a wide variety of places (see also Bulley, 2019):

> Specifically, they came from Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, India, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, the UK and Nigeria. (2021: 555)

The diversity of migrants living in Grenfell Tower becomes emblematic of the social composition of London as a whole. The city being comprised of racial and ethnic difference, mapped into urban places and spaces to create the so-called super-diverse global city. This is the diverse social mosaic from which community unity is built, paradoxically grounded in a common, shared experience of heterogeneous city life (see Charles, 2019 or Waine and Chapman, 2021). Migrants, in this account, are all the same, no matter where in the world they come from. A geography is built for London out of its colonial and postcolonial global linkages to create a city where its elsewheres are here (see also El-Enany 2019; Keenan, 2019; Bradley, 2019). Thus:

> This international and racial segregation is not some historical artefact, but a continuing practice of everyday life (and death) in the global city. The city produces and reproduces it through everyday practices of consumption, circulation, production, and graphic design, drawing migrants in, dividing and housing them according to the financial interests of property speculators. In these ways, the global city contributes to the reproduction *and the replication* of the 'elsewhere' within its everyday life. (Bulley and Brassett, 2021: 558, emphasis in original)

Thus, the fact of people coming from all over the world underpins an argument for a global sense of the city. It indicates that people from elsewhere bring with them their geographical elsewhereness and that, once (t)here, they might meet the geographical elsewhereness of others. There is a danger with this argument. If elsewhere is here and (therefore) here is elsewhere, then the everyday life of the city is determined by an everywhere: 'a global reality', as Tilley and Shilliam (2018: 534) put it. Rather, what the experience of Grenfell indicates is that the global city is geographically differentiated, the meeting of difference operates to construct a lived local that is itself not a consequence of the meeting of different kinds of difference – that is, such an account cannot accommodate alterity: the unassimilable, the unknowable, the indeterminate. The global city, therefore, does not float in an everywhere experience of race, migration and openness to the world (see also Keith et al., forthcoming).

Whilst the Grenfell Tower fire can be interpolated into pre-existing frameworks that emphasize neoliberalism, state violence and social harm (see previous section), it was not always antagonism to neoliberalism, capitalism, colonial legacies that prompted the immediate response to the Grenfell Tower fire. Even so, the community response to the fire did not emerge out of nothing or nowhere, but out of many already existing forms of organisation (see Renwick, 2019). To be sure, some of these operated on the terrain of a globally-aware local politics, such as the Grenfell Action Group (see Shildrick, 2018: 792) and the Radical Housing Network (see Radical Housing Network; Hudson and Tucker, 2019). Thus, in their introduction to *After Grenfell* (2019), Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins and Nadine El-Enany observe:

> Unsurprisingly, Grenfell residents were and are well aware of what the global political economy does to them [. . .] It is again unsurprising that local residents find common cause with struggles elsewhere and recognise that global systems need to change. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, the local community appeared on the streets. In the absence of any official support, or even a timely response from the larger charitable organisations, it fell to residents and survivors of the fire, those organisations already supporting them like the Radical Housing Network, and individuals who joined from elsewhere in solidarity, to organise help and assistance. (pp. xvii–xviii).

Yet, one of the persistent memories of the response to the Grenfell Tower catastrophe were the spontaneous acts of generosity, creating vast depots of gifted clothing, foods, toiletries, toys, baby milk, bedding and other necessities often channelled through religious organisations: Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. Donations and volunteers flowing in not only from other parts of London, but from other parts of the UK – almost 207 tonnes of items, filling 40,000 boxes and as many as 600 volunteers. And money, too: almost £26.5 million (of which, just over £20 million had reached survivors and relatives within a year), spread across over 20 charities, according to the Charity Commission for England. Religion, here, can be seen as a terrain for a politics of alterity producing solidarities grounded in empathy, faith and kindness.

Moreover, the local response to the Grenfell Tower fire sought to compose a different kind of politics altogether (an alterity politics, if you will). Thus, Renwick states:

> The battle to defend life necessitates a language that preserves or rebuilds the conditions that maintain life [. . .] Across the country, people are organising to be heard. They are seldom recognised for their actions, but when they are, their moving image is taken, but their voices have been kept on mute [. . .] If those in power don't listen, the voice of the unheard will speak, and there will be no dictating the terms of the discourse. (p. 43)

In this version of a community response, politics emerges from an 'organising' of vision, purpose and voice – in specific contexts. Yet, too often, this vision is fractured; purpose, dissipated; and the community voice is silenced, muted as Renwick puts it. It is therefore significant that one of the key features of remembrance and protest in the aftermath of Grenfell is the use of silence.

Every month, since the fire, there is a silent walk through the neighbourhood. The walk ends with the names of the victims being read out and the walkers saying together 'forever in our hearts'. This silent walk perhaps is clearly born of respect for those who died and survived and the ones who loved them or emerged out of similar acts of silent remembrance. However, it is also perhaps a response to the feeling of not being listened to and also perhaps to the cacophony of commentary after the fire that once again drowned the voice the community. Whatever the source and motivation, silence articulates the voice and feelings of the community. Far from passive or inarticulate or muted, the silent walk is active, articulate and impassioned (see Launchbury, 2021; Tekin and Drury, 2021). Silent does not mean it did not have things to say. Thus, Les Back describes his experience of attending one of the monthly Grenfell Silent Walks:

> In contrast to the wounding compassion that passes as news, this powerful movement at Grenfell gifts those who attend something else: a sense of connection that bridges differences temporarily in the muted city. On these nights at least, a different London is assembled, one that is less shamefully divided by wealth and social dispossession. (2021: 10)

Almost as a corrective to the idea that the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire were simply victims of a neoliberal system structured to deliver social harm and state violence, the view from below is of a knowledgeable, diverse, vibrant, capable and together community – already actively engaged in a struggle against the feral army of harms of the city. These two views appear in contradiction, but of course this depends on the question of how the openness and closedness of the city are understood.

Let us put it bluntly. If the city is understood as a closed system that has already excluded the properly political from it, then it is not possible to see how these struggles produce anything more than more of the same. Either they are internal to closed system neoliberalism etc., which means they have already been assimilated into consensual democratic processes; or, as bad, they are located in the non-space beyond neoliberalism etc., unable to either break into the closed system or to smash it entirely from the outside. On the other hand, the closed system of neoliberalism could be less integrated, fixed and determining, with various weak points through which struggles can gain access to the social order and effect change. Yet, Grenfell also shows that struggles are themselves also open and closed in various ways: drawing people in, creating alliances and solidarities, in recognition of difference and alterity, thereby also creating new oppositional imaginations and possibilities. Except, processes of politicisation – the politics of alterity – are not always formed on the terrain of neoliberalism etc., and these also count as politics (despite being improperly political). Thus, the grounds for other alliances are made available, whether made operable by noisy marches or silent walks.

Conclusion: the open politics of Grenfell

We began this paper with a discussion of Sennett's Open City. A notion that has been taken up, by some, as principle for designing better cities. Thus, Sendra and Sennett write about the importance of open forms of city life, citing Naples as an example (2020: 26). For them, the open city creates forms of porosity, a sense of passing through the city. The open city must be incomplete, so that physical forms leave open the possibility of adaptation, improvisation and experimentation. This creates a nonlinear city, open-ended, without foreclosing on possible futures. Sennett wishes to intervene in both the built environment and in the city's ways of life to install principles of openness. Thus, the politics of the open city is found in the normative valuation of the open. For us, in contrast, the politics of the open city is not to be found in a conceptual distinction between the open and the closed city. Rather, it is to be found in the politicisation of openness and closedness. This is what we take from Swyngedouw's account of the postpolitical city, which is produced under conditions of western liberal democracy and global capitalism. Here, bluntly put, politicisation takes place *outside* the neoliberal closed system, yet paradoxically *within* the spaces of neoliberalism, perhaps especially within excluded or marginalised cities or parts of cities.

For us, neoliberalism/anti-neoliberalism model of urban politics does not quite grasp how the neoliberal etc. city is itself already a product of a sheer diversity of struggles, violences and antagonisms – many of which have nothing whatsoever to do with neoliberalism, but are about long histories of class, race, sexuality, gender, religion and so on. Here, we can see a politics of alterity and the significance of the improperly political. All this, and more, suggests that the opennesses and closednesses of the city require urgent consideration, as a closed system model that holds postpolitical and political processes in antagonistic tension will tend to exclude other, open processes of politicisation that become manifest in cities. This observation aligns with Oswin and Pratt's critique of critical urban theory

(2021), which questions the ways in which critical urban theory theorizes (see also Jazeel, 2018; Roy, 2016).

Politicisation, we maintain, must be understood contextually. In events. In cities. We sought to demonstrate this through a discussion of the critical responses to the Grenfell Tower tragedy (building on an analytic we have developed elsewhere: see Keith et al., forthcoming). We explored the exposure and reconfiguration of open systems in the wake of the Grenfell Fire tragedy. Our analysis relies on the ways that new configurations of opennesses crystalised into new forms of politics – however briefly and transiently (such as the Silent March or inter-faith giving and cooperation). We believe this reveals more than how closed systems have gaps and fissures through which the properly political can emerge.

The postpolitical city presumes broad participation in its democratic processes and, thereby, presupposes and imposes normative ideals that are seemingly unavailable for contestation. Yet, people can refuse their assignment to their 'proper place' in the socio-spatial order. They can challenge the presumption of equity of process, participation and outcome. They can challenge the normative ideals of the city. We have also seen this in critical responses to the Grenfell Tower catastrophe. Since Grenfell, other events have revealed the politics of alterity – in improperly political moments.

On Saturday, 26 June 2021, at the moment of the easing of lockdown rules designed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, a series of protests took place in London. The People's Assembly Against Austerity gathered in Parliament Square, noisily voicing opposition to a decade of Tory austerity economic policies. The central demand of the protest was what they called a 'new normal', involving saving the NHS, safe workplaces, renationalizing key industries and better protection for workers' rights, decent housing for all, ending endemic institutional racism, amongst other things. That is, arguably, a set of direct challenges to the free reign of neoliberal racial capitalism.

Separately, and a short walk away, there was also an anti-lockdown demonstration. There, protestors flung tennis balls at Number 10 in Downing Street. Flares were let off – and chants of 'shame on you' were reported. The tennis balls, apparently, had short 'not very nice' messages for then Prime Minister Boris Johnson written on them. Despite the carnivalesque atmosphere, something serious was being said. This was a direct challenge to the government over its restrictions, as the so-called anti-vaxxer protestors see it, of people's liberty and right to assemble, their freedom to travel and work. The demand was to push back at the right of government to govern people's rights and liberties. In many ways, this presents a more radical challenge than that of the People's Assembly Against Austerity as it attacks the very consensual foundation of government. Anti-vaxxers attack the consensus with their own dissensual truths. Exactly as, we might wryly observe, Swyngedouw would wish. Also, on the same day, Extinction Rebellion marched in front of the Houses of Parliament (as part of a wave of national protests), demanding immediate radical action on climate change. Extinction Rebellion were clear, their protests of Friday 25 and Saturday 26 June constituted an 'impossible rebellion'. Two days of direct action directed at the crisis in democracy embodied in 'fake news', government corruption and immoral profiteering.

That weekend, in London, consensus seemed in short supply. Arguably, indeed, 'neoliberalism etc.' was under direct challenge: critiques, for example, of global capitalism were explicit in protests by climate change activists; of the political process and global capitalism by the traditional left; and, of the western liberal democratic consensus by right-wing activists or by anti-vaxxers, who were against both the over-reaching of government (as they saw it) and also governmental justifications for restricting civil liberties during the pandemic. Not only does this demonstrate that consensus needs to be built and constantly re-built, but it also shows that dissensus is not always built around the idea that an event or

catastrophe is the inevitable outcome of the quick or slow violence of an all-encompassing system (see also Beveridge and Koch, 2019).

There is, for us, not just a politics associated with openness and closedness, and their instabilities, but also a politics that emerges from the coexistence of different forms of openness and closedness – that is, there is a political struggle over different ways of being open and closed in the city. The important thing, for us, is to see how these ideas are generated in place at particular times. That is, the struggle over ideas about openness and closedness makes some things count politically and other things not; they have implications for how the social is open or not to others; and indeed, is played out in the production of the spatial fabric of the city. Indeed, particular events generate and/or reveal different kinds of openness and closedness.

For us, this indicates that closed system models of the neoliberal etc. city are helpful, but limited, ways of describing the ongoing politicization of the city, its spaces, and its diverse inhabitants. It is not that critiques about the closed oppressive regimes of the city are wrong, but rather that they fail to reflect on what is open and closed in their models of the city – and that this circumscribes the properly political in narrow and formalistic terms. Alternatively, to reinstate the political, we argue that it should be embedded in different understandings of how openness and closedness become operative in the open city.

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ORCID iDs

John Solomos https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1274-9310
Susannah Cramer-Greenbaum https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2391-5700

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Steve Pile teaches Geography at The Open University. He has published on issues concerning place and the politics of identity. Steve is author of *Bodies, Affects, Politics* (2021), *Real Cities* (2005), and *The Body and The City* (1996).

Michael Keith is Director of the PEAK Urban Research Programme. Michael's research focuses on migration-related processes of urban change. His recent book contributions include *African Cities and Collaborative Futures* (2021) and *The Unfinished Politics of Race* (2022).

Karim Murji is Professor of Social Policy at the University of West London, UK. With Sarah Neal and John Solomos Karim is the editor of *An Introduction to Sociology* (Sage 2022) and, with Sarah Neal, he is the editor of *Current Sociology*.

John Solomos is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick. John's most recent book is *Race, Ethnicity and Social Theory* (Routledge 2023). He is Editor in Chief of the international journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

Edanur Yazici is a Research Associate on the PRIME (Protecting Irregular Migrants in Europe) project in Sociology at the University of Bristol. Eda's research sits at the intersection of sociologies of cities, race and migration. Her PhD examined the policy of asylum dispersal and the dynamics of urban belonging.

Susannah Cramer-Greenbaum is a Research Associate on the Open City project in Sociology at the University of Warwick. Susannah's research focuses on neighbourhood change and housing. She has wide experience in participatory planning and design, working in both the US and Papua New Guinea.