

The urban question under illiberalism? *Three thematic approaches*

I. Introduction: *Tangled Urban Illiberalism from California to Kigali*

In the summer of 2023, rumours began circulating about mysterious plans for a new utopian city on 55,000 acres of California farmland (Anguiano, 2023). The venture, draped in secrecy and seemingly devoid of democratic, grassroots conversations, is led (and privately-funded) by a group consisting of Silicon-Valley elites calling themselves ‘Flannery Associates’. The plans involve the construction of an ‘eco-city’, provisionally called ‘California Forever’, to eventually house 75,000 people (ibid).

Such bold, utopian urban visions are not new in California: after all, it is where Walt Disney built his dreamworld, complete with a fairytale castle. California and its Hollywood-imaginaries are where the spectacle of the American suburban dream was produced. Indeed, ‘Californication’ emerged as a late 20th-century buzzword to depict the globalising processes of suburban sprawl. So, the ideas for ‘California Forever’, now being put forward, are not a departure from the so-called ‘California model’ of postmodern urbanism (e.g. Dear and Flusty, 1998, Soja, 1996), often portrayed in urban studies as both exceptional, and indicative of, contemporary trends, patterns (e.g., boom and bust), and socio-technologies and urban imaginaries.

What *is* new with the proposals for ‘California Forever,’ however, are the entanglements of ‘tech 2.0’ ideology (which Smith and Burows, 2021 called neo-reactionary or ‘NRx’), platforms, urban planning, and various illiberal tendencies like the notion of anti-state, libertarian sovereignty and the circumventing of normal democratic checks and balances in the urban planning system, an example of what Easterling (2016) describes as ‘Extrastatecraft’ (see also Slobodian, 2023). The plans for ‘California Forever’ reflect a scale, scope and top-down ambition not dissimilar to the spectacular authoritarian plans for re-making Saudi Arabian or Chinese cities into great, gleaming experiments of the future. These similarities, we suggest, are emblematic of a certain convergence of global illiberal urban models at this time, a trend not lost on political geographers like Natalie Koch (2022) who suggests that entanglements of authoritarian visions, spectacle and urban development bring the ‘liberal’ West into direct conversation with a so-called (and falsely-delineated) authoritarian ‘other’: the ‘other’ becomes the norm. And furthermore, Koch (2022) suggests, Western urbanism has always been illiberal, echoing the arguments of Mondon and Winter (2020) who claim that ‘democracy’ in the West was from its origins, reactionary. The second ascendancy of Donald Trump and the newfound power of tech-moguls like Elon Musk point at the prominence of the ‘NRx’ urban world building taking shape far beyond Silicon Valley.

As plans for ‘California Forever’ move forward, big changes are also underway in Kigali, Rwanda, one of Africa’s fastest-growing cities. Kigali is being re-fashioned by the Singaporean Urban Planning company ‘Surbana Jurong’, which was hired to develop a master plan for the city and which has signed contracts to develop city master plans in 10 African countries (Neuwirth, 2020). Reading over Surbana Jurong’s glitzy website with the

plans for Kigali, one comes across similar buzzwords and schematics to those of ‘California Forever’; however, without the illusion of liberal democracy. Whereas California’s Bay Area cloaks itself in the mask of ‘Blue State’, progressive America, neither Singapore nor Kigali shy from their reputations as illiberal cities with strong authoritarian governments. But all three cities are learning from each other, entangled within each other, and deeply connected.

As Quinn Slobodian notes (2023), the ‘market radicals’, as he calls the Silicon Valley techmoguls and ‘NRx’ urbanist zealots like Peter Thiel, follow in a longer lineage of historical efforts to decouple capitalism from democracy altogether. Looking from Singapore to Kigali to the Bay Area, California, exposes just how far this decoupling has progressed. And notably: the engineers of this transformation, from the days of European exploration and global colonisation to today’s Palo-Alto boardrooms, have often been of/from the ‘liberal’ West.

In our contribution to this *Special Issue*, we thus propose that urban illiberalism is a kind of connective tissue that not only joins cities together across scale and context, but also emerges as a valuable analytical framework, a critical lens, for understanding illiberalism in everyday urban life, and more broadly, global capitalism today. The central question we explore in our paper is *whether there is something inherently illiberal* about the urban condition, e.g., does the urban condition uniquely produce and scaffold illiberalism? If this is so (and we suggest it is), then, what are those specific facets about urbanism that so easily entangle with illiberalism’s processes, outcomes, impacts and spatialisations?

This *Special Issue* (Eraydin, A. Özatağan, G. and Fearn, G.) importantly addresses the fallacy that urban illiberalism is an *exception*, and that it is somehow separable and territorially/morally demarcated into Orientalist cartographies of ‘other’ places (Swyngedouw, 1996; Koch, 2017, 2019; Eraydin et al.).

However, in our intervention we also move one step further, to suggest that not only is urban illiberalism compatible with liberal institutions, processes and structures, but more so, it can be seen as a natural outgrowth and byproduct of these conditions and infrastructures. We highlight how illiberalism is not merely a singular feature of the myriad reactionary, authoritarian, right-wing populist and far-right parties and ideologies now infiltrating city governments across the world, as is often represented to be the case (see Laruelle, 2022), but instead is a planetary urban condition with the capacity to structure urban life everywhere.

Ultimately, liberals, neoliberals and illiberals are frequently ferocious defendants of private property. These defences are sometimes contextually-justified: in postcolonial settings, for example, where subaltern groups fight for tenure, property, or occupancy in its countless forms (see Benjamin and Raman, 2011) against the predatory tentacles of the colonial/neocolonial state, elite actors, and corporate capital. As Sud (2020a and b) found in relation to how urban land is ‘fixed’ and ‘unfixed’ by both state and society in India – bounded and unbounded – the question of illiberalism comes down to whom private property is being defended by/against, and for what reasons, through what power geometries, political manoeuvres, and policy interventions.

In other words, we think in terms of an intersection of liberal/neoliberal/illiberal processes, relations, tendencies and outcomes, operating as a sort of combinatory feedback loop, rather than in opposition to each other. Additionally, we hope to attest to the necessary and inevitable coexistence of liberalism and illiberalism on the ground: there is illiberalism even in the most purportedly liberal contexts, and illiberal settings also contain liberal openings (akin to what Harvey, 2000, called ‘spaces of hope’).

In the rest of the paper that follows, we further define what we interpret urban illiberalism to mean, and why we believe it is necessary to juxtapose urban studies alongside illiberalism more generally. We then animate our argument through three thematic approaches, each an analytical/conceptual perspective on how to go about the dissection of urban illiberalism.

These argumentative themes are, as follows:

First, that the specific *density* of the urban, from the ‘thrown-togetherness’ (Massey, 2005) of the body, the street and the neighbourhood, with its thick knots of connections and intense relations and flows, helps to facilitate and produce illiberalism. Crucially, it is not the density *itself*, but rather, the reactions/responses to and governance of the density, that we suggest trend toward illiberal methods, processes and outcomes.

Second, that the urban exists in a state of **constant emergency and crisis**, which is produced by, and produces, illiberal outcomes and reactionary responses.

Third, we focus on the **speed and virality, or the mobilities** of the urban, especially as mediated and accelerated by and through the digital and algorithmic logics of platformed and cyber-networked urbanisation. These flows, we suggest, are increasingly facilitated by a global project of techno-feudalist NRx urbanism which is at its very core illiberal.

We conclude with some final thoughts on the potential critical value of illiberalism as urban lens, and notably, how this may uncover alternatives and openings and tangential trajectories toward futures where illiberalism is not inevitable: as Luger (2022) notes, illiberalism is not necessarily irreversible. Importantly, since the majority of urban growth is occurring in contexts other than North America and Europe, we leave space open for a variety of trajectories that do not follow established patterns and move beyond the residues of illiberal histories. At the same time, we caution that these majority contexts may offer new frontiers for illiberal affixations and exploitations, given the continuing thirst for the resources and labour that power global urban capitalism.

II. Defining, and Urbanising, Illiberalism

Our opening comparison between ‘California Forever’ and Kigali’s master plan cogently demonstrates that rather than only being tied to contingent political affiliations and ideologies, or attached to specific contextual geographies, facets of illiberalism appear in the transformation of cities worldwide. Whether urban illiberalism is overtly articulated as a coherent political agenda or remains cloaked behind discourses of liberal democracy, it often takes place *through* democracy. It is actively facilitated and legitimised through various

scales of urban decision-making (E.g., Zakaria, 1997 and ‘illiberal democracy’; see also Mondon and Winter, 2020 on ‘reactionary democracy’). We therefore frame urban illiberalism as a type of current or force, even an affect, that transcends political or regional divides.

Although the term ‘illiberalism’ has emerged as a fashionable catchphrase over the last decade or so, existing work has shown limited conceptual consistency in its usage – as unpacked shortly (Zakaria, 1997; Hendrikse, 2018; Laruelle, 2022, Sajó et al., 2022) – with only cursory forays into understanding the term’s value for urban theory (see Luger, 2020; 2022).

Etymologically, it would be convenient to assume that the adjective ‘illiberal’ simply denotes the opposite of ‘liberal’ (Laruelle, 2022). To arrive at a working definition, this reading would involve a categorical contrasting exercise to all things belonging to the unwieldy realm of liberal thought within political philosophy which, of course, largely surpasses the scope of this paper. For instance, we could revisit Mill’s exposition that individual liberties should only ever be curtailed “to prevent harm to others” (Mill, 2001 [1859]: 13) through checks and balances on state power, which he otherwise deemed prone to paternalism, self-interest, tyranny, and corruption at the expense of the freedom of the wider citizenry – i.e., traits that could be conveniently categorised as ‘illiberal’. Similarly, Rawls’ (2005 [1971]) ideas of the legal protection of universal freedoms and acceptance toward other ideologies are seemingly apparent opposites of illiberal thought. And the list goes on: all things antithetical to free speech, free markets and trade, porous borders, small state, open-mindedness, respect for others, readiness for debate, and support for diversity at all levels, and other foundational values of progressive liberalism seen as the default social, moral, and political arrangement of the West today (Walzer, 2020; Nussbaum, 2011). On the one hand, then, illiberalism is a novel, fluid, and context-based ideological realm that presents a somewhat coherent backlash against contemporary liberalism across politics, economics, culture, and geopolitics, among other domains. Illiberalism calls for nation-centric and traditionalist solutions favouring sovereignty, socio-cultural homogeneity, anti-immigration measures, the protection of conservative moral values against liberal currents, and reactionary responses to globalisation (Laruelle, 2022).

On the other hand, we further concur with Laruelle (2022) that assembling illiberalism’s definition solely as a series of anti-liberal notions would be incomplete and inaccurate, since illiberalism, in our understanding, stems directly from mutations of liberalism and thus the two are often particularly challenging to separate, as further explored shortly. Sajó et al. (2022) propose that “illiberalism is not an ideology or a regime type” (Sajó et al., 2021: xxi), which is partly what Laruelle claims. Importantly, though, they stress that illiberalism is highly compatible with, and is often enabled by, democratic forms of governance. They (ibid) stress that illiberalism need not be violent, nor does it have to be unpleasant per se, but forms the scaffolding of long-established, wider societal conditions.

While liberalism is fragile and thus needs to be constantly fought out and safeguarded (see also Lefebvre, 1964), we further suggest that illiberalism might be the path of least resistance;

one that society is prone to falling back onto if the fight for liberal values is abandoned. Its seductive appeal lies in finding quick and easy answers to complex questions and not having to take every perspective into consideration at all times when making decisions. Illiberalism is quicker, simpler, cuts Gordian knots of societal problems with professed ease, and lurks behind the parliamentary theatrics of representative government and opaque office towers of corporate technocrats alike. This does not make it just, or optimal; but points to its easy proliferation, promulgation, and receptive uptake.

We also claim that neoliberalism is not incompatible with illiberalism, but makes an easy bedfellow; more broadly, liberalism underpins and catalyses illiberal outcomes (Mondon and Winter, 2020), a sort of liberalism-neoliberalism-illiberalism compound. Bruff (2013) was onto this with his notion of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’, and so was Hendrikse (2018) with his idea of ‘neoliberal illiberalism’. We follow their (and others’) existing arguments and restate the claim that neoliberalism is both dependent upon, and results in, illiberal outcomes. Neoliberalism carries inherently authoritarian traits, such as class hegemony, segregation, discrimination, revanchism, and immigration controls (which can mean either encouraged or discouraged migration, but always for economic, rather than humanistic aims), among other things, which continue to puncture societies around the world, including the ones considered the most liberal in terms of their government’s political affiliation (see Brown, 2019).

As Bruff and Starnes (2019) argue, the traditional theoretical canon of neoliberalism – including the work of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek – inherently promotes repressive and anti-democratic forms of power in service of inequality. The profoundly authoritarian tendencies of neoliberalism on the ground were indeed traceable from the outset. Stuart Hall (e.g., 1988) argued this forcefully in terms of the state’s aggressive racial capitalism, coming from the context of 1980s Britain. The rise of Thatcherism in the UK was set against extensive welfare cuts and toughened law enforcement, and resulted in the draconian repression of miners’ unions in the North-East of England (see Hudson, 1998). Moving forward in history, whether we turn towards ostensibly liberal democratic contexts or more authoritarian forms of statecraft today, neoliberalism appears to be well-nigh omnipresent across the globe (see Peck and Tickell, 2002; Hendrikse, 2018). Thus we suggest that neoliberalism is at its core an input and output of a global urban illiberal condition.

Above all, our principal claim is that illiberalism is, at its heart, an *urban phenomenon*. In a similar vein to the ‘urbanisation’ of global neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), the planetary reach of illiberal thought and action (see Koch, 2019) is also profoundly rooted in cities. We acknowledge Storper’s (2016) reservations about seeing neoliberalism as an inherently urban condition – given that, in his view, neoliberal policies of austerity and market deregulation are national in scale rather than necessarily being urban – together with his claim that cities are in fact more tightly regulated rather than being laissez-faire neoliberal. However, when thinking of the regulation of urban space, we consider the notion of ‘roll-out neoliberalism’ (Peck and Tickell, 2002) more compelling, in which the neoliberal state plays an active regulatory and punitive role to enforce the market order and serve the interests of private investment at the behest of the poor and the marginalised (see also Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Additionally, because cities tend to be the most concentrated

spaces of capital accumulation (Harvey, 1985), we do believe that struggles over capital and land are indeed most visibly fought out in cities as opposed to the countryside, often in repressive and authoritarian – that is, illiberal – ways.

Border control mechanisms and the oppressive screening of migrants and suspected terrorists have now found their way into the nooks and crannies of cities, as compellingly demonstrated by Graham's (2004) account of 'urban geopolitics'. Post-9/11, borders have become far more intensely policed, but surveillance and profiling have been equally extended to the most mundane spaces and checkpoints across cities from public transport routes to supermarket checkouts and university lecture attendance (see Katz, 2007). Furthermore, the expulsion of 'undesirable' surplus populations, such as the poor, the marginalised, and the homeless in the name of 'downtown renaissance', carries profound implications for understanding the unequal distribution of socio-political liberties across urban space and social pyramids from Los Angeles to Glasgow (e.g., Mitchell, 1997; MacLeod and Johnstone, 2012). Liberalism for the city's privileged thus remains 'anything but liberal' (Larner, 2003: 512) for the city's repressed Other. Much as neoliberalism has become a global phenomenon, then, the illiberal responses to dealing with the residual populations of market capitalism – as well as resistance to such measures – have likewise been coalescing around urban centres and frontiers of power.

In a similar vein, illiberalism is integral to the emergence of the post-political often identified in relation to contemporary neoliberal trends in urban governance (see Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). The subsumption of disagreement and a loss of diversity in political views put liberty at risk. As Walzer (2020: online) puts it, "the end of antagonism is not something I would look forward to; it would be an illiberal outcome". Post-political critics argue that disputes between the Left and the Right are becoming transcended through an illusory consensus on the existing – and highly exclusionary – neoliberal market order and a shared prioritisation of private property. What emerge as a result of this de-politicisation are elite-driven configurations of techno-managerial deliberation that exclude the urban commons and perpetuate top-down, unelected, and non-democratic forms of decision-making through granting experts considerable power and authority at the behest of the wider citizenry. These 'experts' can be in some cases management or urban planning consultants, or in other cases, despotic leaders, and often a mix of both. These concerns take us back to the techno-utopian planning agendas of 'Neom' and 'California Forever', as well as the example of Singaporean master-planners Surbana Jurong working for the client Paul Kagame, Rwanda's authoritarian president, through the rhetoric of 'eco city' narratives.

III. Urban Density, from the Neighbourhood to the Planetary, *Facilitates Illiberalism*

At the turn of the 20th-century, attempting to make sense of the textures of then-emerging modern urban life, Georg Simmel (2010[1903]) wrote of the "intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" (2010[1903]:103). Simmel portrays a dense mosaic of urban life that is in many ways rational, governed as it is

by the market and the daily social/consumerist exchanges. But this rationality is messy, and not necessarily democratic. The urban mind, for Simmel, is a “calculating” one (ibid: 104), survivalist, self-preservationist, reactionary. The individual, ultimately, becomes a “single cog” against the “vast overwhelming organisation of thing and forces”... transforming from a subject “into [a] purely objective existence” (Simmel, 1903:109).

Revisiting Simmel’s musings now, we can consider the way the urban today stretches far beyond what was possible in that fin de siècle era. The urban, in all its violent intensity, exists in and across multiple scales, from the body and the home and the neighbourhood, to the city and region, to the digitally and algorithmically-facilitated planetary. The types of thick and rapid relations and stimuli that are integrally urban, are greatly accelerated and density exists at scales far greater than previous eras. We do not suggest that urban life and its dense knot of encounters are necessarily unpleasant or negative, but rather, we suggest the structures and governance underpinning and overseeing this dense public often trends toward illiberal mechanisms.

Our first proposal is thus that the **density** of the urban scale – whether in a high-rise, a neighbourhood, a vast urban conglomeration, or a planetary network of relations and flows - is messy, and not easily governed by, or resulting naturally in, democratic processes or outcomes. To reiterate, we do not suggest it is the density itself which is illiberal; in fact, density can catalyse new and emerging forms of democratic relations and grassroots power-equities and all manner of resistances. Rather, we propose that density often catalyses illiberal state or market responses and can often result in uneven and violent outcomes, witnessed from London’s Grenfell Tower fire tragedy, to Gaza’s dense urban human catastrophe. Density is often framed as a crisis in itself necessitating drastic solutions; or it is the byproduct of territorial enclosure, displacement, and housing or land scarcity.

As McFarlane (2016) notes, there are countless different understandings and lived realities of urban density, from topographical and quantitative measurements to political understandings and other subjective perceptions rooted in socio-cultural heterogeneity. With this complexity in mind, we suggest there is often a pragmatic cruelty and oppressive structure to urban life, that sits alongside the urban’s capability for delight, emancipation, liberation, reinvention and democratic interventions and experimentations. Of course, urban cruelty and violence do not have to be the case: as urban sociologists like Wirth (1938), Elijah Anderson (2011) or AM Simone (2018) have suggested, the dense mosaic of urban worlds can generate all manner of potentials and encounters, from the beautiful and sublime to the dark and despondent. Dissensus, agonism, antagonism, all names given for the messy and often productive tension of urban life, are not necessarily negative (as Mouffe, 1999 states) and can be deeply democratic in function, even if, inevitably not everyone is satisfied. But too often, these tensions are appropriated by, and succumb to, illiberal forces and tendencies – as evidenced by global urban events of recent years from Washington DC to Gaza City (the latter, notoriously and horrifically, situated in one of the most densely-populated strips of urban land on earth).

Density is never neutral and its production is wound up with uneven decision-making priorities, potentially unjust planning agendas, displacement, and certain forms of density being preferentially valued by states and market actors over others (Benjamin and Raman, 2011; Habermehl and McFarlane, 2023). We look to sites of especially-enhanced actually-existing material density - namely, the world's densest inhabited cities, from Hong Kong to Manila, Manhattan to Dhaka and Paris (notably, cities across East, South and West/North). For it is also the case that these cities are among the world's most unequal. A density of inequality, in other words, results from illiberalism's uneven production of space; this dense juxtaposition then stimulates illiberal securitisation, segregation, governance of, and encounters in, space. As Koch (2022) argues, density is often featured in the spectacular plans and urban futures offered by authoritarian regimes, pointing to the glittering obelisks rising hundreds of floors into the sky over Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Astana, Shanghai. Or, Manhattan, London's 'Square Mile'. Or again, we mention the density of substandard housing like London's Grenfell Tower, a byproduct of that city's illiberal property development nexus and decades of degradation of social housing.

Because after all, the neoliberal West, too, produces this authoritarian density. Towering structures, such as the 'supertalls' that now exceed 500 metres, are often hailed as the epitome of future urban living through notions of land use efficiency, mixed-use developments, ecological sustainability, and even smart urbanisation (Keil, 2020). And yet, they can contain a messy and often conflictual range of uses, users, and materialities: they are loci of dissensus (Karoliotas, 2023). Illiberal outcomes often result from socio-spatial dissensus; for example, the proliferation of separate entrances for lower-income residents in luxury towers (Geiselhart, et al., 2020) to the exclusive and segregationist neighbourhood-governance mechanisms found in many local communities. Other forms of density are widely stigmatised and persecuted, with the incessant planetary drive for slum clearances being case in point.

We highlight again how density can turn into a 'political target' (McFarlane, 2016: 631) and can, in short, attract violent and undemocratic responses. We look towards how the police and military enclose, exclude, or punish crowds. We point to public transport meltdowns and yelling matches; throngs of tourists that choke city rental markets; throngs of cars and rickshaws that clog streets and sidewalks. We point to lingering colonial motives behind the oppressive overnight clearance of messy bazaars and ostensibly chaotic slums for the alleged sake of eradicating inhumane living conditions and rendering them transparent and governable, while treating locals as expendable and ignoring their established community ties and livelihoods (Benjamin, 2020). We point to the political silencing of the impoverished urban majority as wealthy elites and corporate moguls rampantly pursue neo-illiberal visions of newly built transport nodes, retail centres, financial hubs, and segregated suburban residential tower blocks in the name of development and competitiveness (Simone and Pieterse, 2017; *The Urban Popular Economy Collective*, 2022). We look towards Delhi, where authorities demolish slums and displace hundreds of thousands of dwellers for white-collar neighbourhood developments as part of the city's broader environmental politics

(Baviskar, 2020). We look across scale, and across the planet, to note these shared (albeit distinct) urban patterns and characteristics, which appear in various site-specific intensities.

And we point – also - to peripheral suburban and exurban sprawl, which heralds a different kind of density; a density which is not always vertical. For example, the density of toxins at a city's edge, in the dumping grounds of rubbish or wastewater. The density of industrial warehouses and logistics facilities, airports or superhighways. The density of political conflicts between urban and rural worldviews, which meet in angry ways at the suburban/exurban borderlands (Luger and Schwarze, 2021; Luger, 2024).

For Doreen Massey (2005), the kind of dense encounters in public spaces (and in urban life more generally) represent a sort of collision, a crash, of bodies, relations, affects, materials. Massey framed this as 'thrown-togetherness' where differences, in terms of people, ethnicity, religion, class, age, disability, e.g., are concentrated. 'Thrown-togetherness' offers a stark departure from frequent depictions of the multiplicity of urban life as a sort of balanced choreography or symphony; one that the urbanist Jane Jacobs (1961) referred to as a 'daily sidewalk ballet', and Henri Lefebvre likened to a co-created artwork, or 'oeuvre' (2016), or 'rhythm' (1992). For Massey, 'thrown-togetherness' is defined by a healthy agonism which can catalyse productive democratic engagement, but can just as easily result in hostilities, violence, and authoritarian oppression. Lefebvre (1992) suggested that the urban rhythm is not always synchronised and can quickly become discordant, out of tune, 'arrhythmia'. We acknowledge the counter-point that much anti-urban resentment and reactionary populism seems anchored in lower-density, suburban/exurban and rural areas (e.g., 'left behind' regions); yet we would counter this by suggesting that these movements often find their footing and ideological leadership, and street-visibility, in dense urban areas (Trump tower, at the heart of Manhattan, a stark example of this!).

Gawlewicz and Yiftachel (2022) integrate 'thrown-togetherness' with the realities of urban citizenship, where new urban forces have 'mobilised a range of hostile environment policies towards migrant, indigenous and marginalised communities, propelling practices of bordering, denial of rights, housing displacement and exclusion' (ibid, 346). Whilst Bologna, Rome, Singapore, Glasgow, Budapest, Jerusalem/Al-Quds and Dhaka are the examples in their (ibid.) exposition, we suggest a planetary proliferation, and lived reality, of hostile, (read: illiberal) urban life, particularly heightened and intensified for those on the margins. Hostile, *thrown-together* urban life exists everywhere, and density can exacerbate such hostilities (e.g., border regimes; intrusive surveillance mechanisms; authoritarian and right-populist approaches to governance, control and production of space). The density of inequalities can spiral into an intensity of conflict.

Scholars studying informality in cities of Majority World may rightfully disagree that 'thrown-togetherness' is necessarily conducive to illiberal friction and hostile cohabitation, and instead argue that dense informal spaces harbour diverse opportunities through mutual support and collaboration (Benjamin, 2020; *The Urban Popular Economy Collective*, 2022; Simone and Pieterse, 2017; Simone and Castán Broto, 2022). They suggest that at the micro level, these spaces facilitate care, generosity, cooperation, improvised livelihood practices

among locals, as well as intricately negotiated property relations and interlocking micro-spaces of retail and trade (ibid). However, such openings – traditionally encapsulated by Jacobs’ (1961) ‘sidewalk ballet’ metaphor – must be continuously guarded as slums are frequent targets of the aforementioned clearance agendas of planners, investors, developers, and municipal administrations. Benjamin (2020) could argue how density may facilitate forms of “informal” (dis)order that subvert top-down municipal clearance agendas and elite-driven redevelopment projects through haphazard and adaptively improvised forms of jazz-like “jugaad”, to borrow Chattaraj’s (2012) concept. Such endeavours might expand the scope of inclusionary futures possible within the urban condition.

On the one hand, then, state-orchestrated crackdowns and demolitions therefore offer a straightforwardly seductive illiberal solution – the path of less resistance without the need to understand informal community dynamics in their full complexity. On the other hand, as described by Benjamin (2020) and *The Urban Popular Economy Collective* (2022), the urban majority must constantly safeguard its fragile liberties in densely inhabited quarters through negotiation, loopholes, personal connections with state officials, and community-level cooperation, which takes us back to the previously discussed Lefebvrian (1964) notion that democracy is a permanent struggle that needs to be fought out time and time again.

IV. The Urban Perpetually Produces and is Produced by Ongoing Emergency and Crisis, Resulting in Illiberal Responses

Urban illiberalism produces, manufactures, and relies upon ongoing crises, and these crises instigate and are appropriated to justify illiberal state and non-state responses. Planetary urban density, then (see previous section), is inseparable from a planetary urban crisis. This crisis in turn instigates and catalyses illiberal responses, which play out and take shape in different ways. Planetary urbanisation, as it has been proposed (e.g. Merrifield, 2018) is a planetary urban crisis, or rather, crises, insofar as urban fiscal crises (inequality, austerity, bankruptcy) are entangled with broader Anthropocenic crises (e.g. climate change and climate threats; migration and unstable geopolitics; health and pandemics and links between urbanism and broader ecologies; Catterall, 2014; Arboleda, 2016). Klein (2007) writes of how illiberal states and demagogues take advantage of urban crises, both real and imagined: ‘shocks’ to the system, like the previously mentioned terror events of September 11th 2001 in the United States, galvanise all manner of illiberal responses, from mass surveillance and security infrastructures to wars and racist, anti-migrant or other exclusionary policies (see Donald Trump’s ‘Muslim Ban’, 2017).

The concept of an ongoing and extended urban crisis is not new. The urban question, for Marxian/critical urban scholars, is a question of an ongoing, manufactured and produced crisis (Zukin, 1980; Harvey, 1987). This is often framed as an ongoing fiscal crisis, a byproduct of industrial capitalism’s capacity to create and destroy urban environments and inexorably find new ways of exploitation and ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2017). These framings have been dominant in critical urban studies in particular during the

neoliberal age, beginning in the 1970s and continuing to present, as neoliberal urbanism has undergone different cycles, fads, and context-specific configurations.

In a similar vein, Nussbaum (2011) notes the rhetorical configurations of ‘emergency’ discourses used to warrant the suppression of liberties in erstwhile democratic/liberal societies. Nussbaum refers back to John Rawls, in explaining the complex interplay between protected ‘rights’ like free speech/expression and the acute status of an emergency which might negate these rights.

We suggest that the urban crisis/crises have escalated to new intensities in recent years, instigating new forms and mechanisms of illiberal responses. Furthermore, we suggest that the ongoing crisis narrative under illiberalism (i.e., crisis as *rule* rather than exception) contradicts Rawlsian notions in which free speech can only be limited in the very special circumstances (i.e., a constitutional crisis) and for limited periods of time. Klein (2007), and in more recent arguments as well, suggests that events like September 11th ushered in a permanent state of urban crisis. As Agamben (2008) argued, writing in the context of the post September 11/Iraq War ongoing security paradigm, the urban crisis and emergency/cies is/are abused by illiberal forces to justify an ongoing ‘state of exception’ where normal democratic protocols are abandoned in response, in the name of public safety, order, security. These things happen in both dramatic/violent, and banal/softer ways. Neighbourhoods are razed, people displaced; but at a micro-level, authoritarianism becomes deployed in community relations and street-level governance (e.g., neighbourhood ‘watch’ programmes; hostile architecture; cameras; racial profiling; ‘zero crime’ attitudes and approaches). Democracy, in its consultative slowness, bureaucratic accountability and agonistic pluralism, is seen as inconvenient for these plans, these fever dreams. We warn, in closing, that anti-democracy is itself an urban crisis, and that falling for these illusions is a dangerous distraction from the messy work of crisis-management in day-to-day urban life.

Among the most recent examples of a planetary urban crisis is Covid-19 and in particular how virally pandemic-informed urban planning took on illiberal characteristics. Without challenging the necessity of many measures aimed at containing the pandemic, we nod once more to cities like Singapore which were early-adopters of some of the strictest Covid-19 measures and technologically-advanced ‘smart’ mechanisms, or again to Kigali, Rwanda, which like Singapore, took an especially aggressive approach on containing the epidemic.

Covid-19 revealed how emergency-response applications in the majority-urban world, from many cities that would be characterised as illiberal – Singapore, or Shanghai, Kigali or Kolkata proliferated globally. ‘Smart city’ crisis responses, e.g., to Covid-19’s public health threat, have sometimes taken illiberal dimensions (e.g., enforced lockdowns, strict mask or distancing mandates; closed borders and public spaces; fines, penalties and arrests and even deportations for rule-breaking). Whilst many of these measures have been hegemonically-adopted as necessary, temporary measures for the greater good of public health (and we as authors do not propose that none of these were necessary!), we suggest these measures and the technologies employed to monitor and enforce them represent another case of the

entanglements of technologies ('NRx'), ideologies, and, interestingly, post-colonial hybridities vis East-West, South-North.

In these trends of proliferating urban crises we also see, as we noted previously, convergences and hybrids of Majority-World urban approaches and so-called Western approaches to urban crisis-management, and herein, views to places like India's post-colonial urban milieu are instructive. Datta (2015; 2019; Datta and Odendaal, 2019) suggests that illiberal 'smart city' initiatives easily integrated into urban planning agendas in Indian cities, part of a longer post-colonial lineage of utopian projects responding to challenges of modernity and development, however, adopting approaches that reinforced (rather than challenged) long-standing social exclusions and inequalities. Through the case of India's 'first smart city', Dholera, in Gujarat, Datta explores how 'smart' urban logics - in this case delivered by a UK-based company, Halcrow - produce technocratic, privatised urban landscapes, akin to what Atkinson and Bridge (2015) have called 'new urban colonialism'. Similarly, Sood and Kennedy (2022) highlight how Indian urban entrepreneurialism combines Western-conceptions of intra-urban competition (Harvey, 1987) with the extant authoritarian-neoliberalism of President Modi's regime as it governs at the local/regional scale.

We point also to the dramatic and large-scale combinations of brutal state and private-militarised responses to social movements in urban settings like Hong Kong, Paris, Moscow, Istanbul, London, Tel-Aviv and Santiago in recent years (just to name a few, on themes such as pro-democracy, anti-war, social or housing justice, or human/migrants rights). The contexts are disparate and varied in their state-society structures and urban textural adaptations, but the images of militarised responses (tear gas, batons, blood) unify these cases. But we note, importantly, that urban activism (and associated civil and state violence) are not only in the progressive domain: we can point to the far-right's various manifestations in recent years, from outside of migrant hotels in Britain, to Hindu-Nationalist crowds assembled in (and far beyond) India, to extremist Israeli settlers in urban Palestine. These, too, are indicative of, and responding to, real or perceived crises. We suggest that further convergence is occurring, as illiberal urbanism presents an alternative future that can shimmer and taunt with promise, illusory and grandiose as these promises are, of a crisis-free urban world. Just witness the marketing material of the megalithic urban dreamscapes drawn up by Saudi Arabia or Dubai (e.g., 'Neom', the future city in the Desert); or, for that matter, 'California Forever', the proposed new city in the San Francisco Bay Area in our introduction. Shared technologies connect these places, utilized for 'emergency' measures, deeply embedded in the military-industrial-financial nexus with its many tentacles and vortices of violence.

All this is to say that, we argue, urbanisation is inherently a condition of crises, and these crises are appropriated to justify illiberal responses, policies, and outcomes. The illiberal condition resulting from urban crisis thereby self-perpetuates further crisis, and then further illiberalism, an ongoing and deepening anti-democratic feedback loop. In the face of authoritarian responses, democratic processes can seem messy (and indeed, they are!), inefficient (insofar as they are consultative, agonistic and pluralistic), and slow. Illiberal

responses to crises can seem more efficient, more effective and *faster*. It is this last point that we take up in our final section: that the speed and virality of urban mobilities rely upon, and help to facilitate, illiberalism.

V. Fast Policies and Mobilities: the *Virality of Urban Illiberalism's Circulation*

'California Forever', assembled as it is through configurations of private land, private investment and the bypassing of California's normal processes for public-planning consultations and community-based approaches, fits neatly within the 'neo-reactionary', digitally-networked, technologically-driven turn in planning, or, 'NRx' (Smith and Burrows, 2021). NRx-urbanism follows/parallels another trend, which is the viral popularity of specific illiberal global urban models, like the oft-referenced authoritarian Singapore, as 'fast' policy mobilities that are imagined and adapted/adopted/emulated as 'best practice' urbanism (Woods and Kong, 2017), for their 'green' credentials and perceived technocratic efficiency, while the underpinning illiberal ideologies or outcomes of these models are glossed over or considered justifiable collateral baggage (Grant et al., 2019).

As we unpacked in our introduction, 'NRx' has been an increasingly dominant strain within urban policy, planning and development over the past 20 years, following the development of the 'internet of things' and its intensifying infiltration into public policy, public space, and urban life (Amoore, 2018; Datta and Odendaal, 2019). With the recent ascendancy of Elon Musk and acolytes to the top echelons of political power, 'NRx' has morphed into a kind of techno-feudalism which has huge implications for cities and urban life worldwide.

Smith and Burrows (2021:143) propose that "...the aim of NRx seems to be to dissolve existing nation-states into 'competing authoritarian sea-steads on the model of Singapore'". The rise of 'NRx' urbanism also parallels the recent growth and spread of the far-right, manifesting through various guises and monikers (e.g., 'alt right', in the United States, after the 2008-2009 financial crisis) (Mudde, 2019). Data - its production, its extraction, its control and its monetisation, are the central pillar of 'NRx' urbanism and its productions of landscapes and urban life-worlds.

In a just-in-time world – with information and financial transfers available via a 'click' and a global supply/logistics/infrastructural system ever-adapting for faster mechanisms of circulation and accumulation – illiberalism, traveling at light speed, has gone viral. The acceleration of capital via the offline/online infrastructures of accumulation, akin to what Datta (2023) coins as 'digitalisation as urbanisation', an urban configuration of what Bratton (2015) outlines as a 'vast planetary computational machine'. Key to the machine is the ability, and need, to move faster, faster, and *faster*.

The relationship between speed and illiberalism dates back to the temporary dictators of Ancient Rome, who were granted unlimited emergency powers to make rapid decisions during exceptional times of danger (Gross and Aoláin, 2006; cf. previous section). However, while such instances of *rapid governance* require emergency situations to gain legitimacy, the virality of digital technologies in the daily life and decision-making of cities is becoming

increasingly normalised and unchallenged, making speediness a new status quo that is likewise prone to producing authoritarian outcomes. As we, too, become digitalised urban citizens, we, too, fall prey to short attention spans and addiction to instant gratification. This is the nature of the urban-as experience, as cities increasingly behave like digital media influencers, or what David Banks (2022) calls the ‘attention economy’ of the authentic city. Relevant for this paper – and special issue – are the ways these digital subjectivities and infrastructures operate via virally-circulating illiberal ‘Extrastatecraft’ (Easterling, 2016), circumventing the normal spaces, institutions and sites of democratic society.

The above outlined concerns are particularly acute given the rapid global spread of viral planning strategies across urban spaces through ‘fast policy’ transfer (see Peck and Theodore, 2015) – also productively captured by the more general Marxian frame of time-space compression (Harvey, 1990) – which quickly render localised instances of less-than-democratic technocracy a planetary urban problem. As notions such as ‘smart cities’, ‘eco-cities’, ‘sustainable cities’, and so on, have become unstoppably popular global policy catchphrases in recent decades (de Jong et al., 2015), their technological and political implications must be carefully considered against the backdrop of fast policy mobilities.

Wilson and Wyly’s (2022) analysis of Flint, Michigan and Jakarta, Indonesia demonstrates the planetarily circulating policies of techno-managerial expertise around smart urbanism, the asymmetric concentration of authority in the hands of weakened states parasitically drawing resources from other stakeholders such as public-private partnerships, and continuing to quietly punish the urban poor, in what they dub ‘Dracula urbanism’. In persistently targeting perceived social ills such as dilapidated neighbourhoods and marginalised sections of society, the fast global transfer of smart city imaginaries can thus swiftly relapse into the continuation of neoliberal revanchism in less evident but nonetheless damaging ways (e.g. N. Smith, 1996). Meanwhile, more overtly politicised uses of smart technology in entrenching urban racial and class divides are likewise alive and well, as seen through the application of smart CCTV in the racialised politics of segregation governance in Miskolc, Hungary (Dürr, 2023). With the sheer scale and speed of policy transfer, cities can easily become new test sites of oppressive technological imaginaries and exclusionary tactics of social control, structuring urban landscapes in highly anti-democratic ways in Dubai, Dholera, London, and Masdar alike.

The explosive and ever-mutating nexus between cyberspace and society is most intensely negotiated through the immense spatial concentration of end-user data and devices in dense urban settings, relayed real-time to the opaque yet powerful data hubs, control rooms, operating systems, and algorithmic platforms of corporate developers and techno-giants (Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2020). Mark Zuckerberg’s right-libertarian tech ethos of ‘move fast and break things’, or Elon Musk’s quest for both media and outer space dominance, for instance, or the previously mentioned ‘NRx’ urbanism, sharply indicate a competitive urge to accelerate growth in the digital sphere for further capital accumulation.

The platformisation of urban life presents an unprecedented scale and speed at which devices can be tracked, updated, alerted, and utilised for garnering private and individual information

(Zuboff, 2019; Sadowski, 2020). We mention again the COVID-19 pandemic as a stark example of how digital platforms and predictive algorithms pervaded urban landscapes across the globe, reorganising urban politics and decision-making and necessitating novel institutional configurations and innovations, particularly through the ways that public and private actors monitored and tracked bio-data through testing and contact tracing (see McGuirk et al., 2021).

The speed at which data is being collected and manipulated by corporate entities to inform, enhance, and optimise an increasingly technocratic form of urban decision-making is far more compatible with illiberalism than with democratic political debate, an holistic appreciation of diverse perspectives, and slow and inclusive governance. As 'Big Data' comes to provide faster, more accurate, finer-grained, and holistic information about cities than ever before (Kitchin, 2014), the purported legitimacy and power of decision-making is increasingly prone to slipping out of the hands of representative government and captured by experts, corporate managers, and technocrats instead, in a newfound coalescence of the 'unelected state' (Wilson, 1995; see also Söderström et al., 2014).

In other words, the platformisation of urban life is an additional factor in the hollowing-out of traditional political disagreements between Left and Right, and rendering urban governance prone to the previously discussed tendency of post-politicisation. Against the growing influence of technology firms and corporate IT giants in data ownership and management, it is the very governments whose power is becoming increasingly undermined as elected decision-makers often fail to keep up with the rapidly growing technical expectations around digital expertise (Taylor Buck and While, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). What is more, members of the public not in possession of the training and competence to understand algorithms and artificial intelligence are bound to be left behind very quickly too, thus becoming further excluded from decision-making in increasingly algorithmically ruled urban contexts bereft of electoral liberties.

The techno-futures of urban governance thus foreshadow increasingly untransparent corporate-driven decision-making mechanisms, rooted in intensifying everyday surveillance geared towards profit-oriented consumer predictions that put data from the people before data for the people (Zuboff, 2019; Sadowski, 2020). This, in turn, (again, 'Extrastatecraft'), may bypass democratic accountability and transparency, since real-time user data tends to remain behind closed doors and yet inform urban decision-making ever more profoundly, with Toronto's data protection controversies around the subsequently failed Sidewalk Labs smart city project being case in point (Söderström et al., 2014; Kitchin et al., 2015; Goodman and Powles, 2019), as much as the previously discussed 'California Forever' and 'Neom' megaprojects. These development visions are all susceptible to the hollowing out of urban democracy and the lure of fast, expert-driven, managerial, anti-state, 'NRx', and authoritarian decisions.

From Gandy's (1996) early intervention on the 'panoptic sort' and Graham's (2005) notion of 'software-sorted geographies' to dystopian visions of data held about us determining access to goods and services (Kitchin, 2019) – something that already exists on a variety of

platforms including credit scoring systems and user ratings on Google Maps, Uber or Airbnb, among other things – our choices, options, and life chances are increasingly at the mercy of algorithms, subject to the whims of the ‘vectorialist stack’, as Wark (2021) calls the digital form of capital within which cities/citizens now exist. Furthermore, considering the propensity of machine learning to develop discriminatory tendencies – and, even more worryingly, validate them from a seemingly techno-scientific perspective – from racialised search engines and border controls to classificatory profiling and the reproduction of territorial stigma in predictive policing, significant adjustments will be necessary to prevent authoritarian forms of algorithmic governance from unfolding (Bauman and Lyon, 2013; Sadowski and Pasquale, 2015; Jefferson, 2018). Indeed, if we are to take Cugurullo’s (2021) notion of ‘Frankenstein urbanism’ seriously – whereby cities run by artificial intelligence will become autonomous behemoths uncontrollable by their creators – then we must recognise that the threat of illiberalism is no longer simply conditioned by humans, but also one that is increasingly shifting towards the codes, servers, and battlegrounds of cyberspace. These, too, are at stake in Kigali, ‘California Forever’, Singapore, and the global spread of ‘NRx’ urbanis and its capacity to move fast and break things.

VI. Conclusion: Urban Illiberalism Forever, and *Other Possible Futures*

In this paper we suggested that illiberalism offers an urban connective tissue across borders, hemispheres, and traditional notions / ascriptions of ‘North’, ‘South’, ‘West’, and East’. We are certainly not the first to hint at the banalities of easily-overlooked micro-fascisms that underpin daily life (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983; Bratich, 2024), or the ways that illiberal politics become deeply biological and embodied (e.g., Foucault, 2007). What we offer is to push these thoughts into a decidedly urban frame.

Furthermore, with the majority of global urban growth and development occurring in zones like Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, it is important to look at how illiberalism can be both an emergent condition and a neo-colonial one, deeply entangled in Northern/Western capitalism’s thirst for new frontiers for exploitation of resources, labour, and territory. At the time of this writing, Kigali’s Kagame wages a shadow war to secure vital raw materials such as cobalt in Eastern Congo, through the funding of the Milita M23 (Wafula, 2025). This cobalt fuels smart-phone batteries in Berkeley and Berlin.

Witness the real estate developers of gated communities, the urban frontiers of walls, checkpoints, and ever more intensely-surveilled public and private spaces, expert managerial coalitions bypassing democratic channels of governance, technologies of social sorting and exclusion, as well as the corporate ‘Big Data’ giants powering the rise of discriminatory machine learning, opaque urban operating systems, and software-sorted geographies (Graham, 2005; Jefferson, 2018; Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2020). Witness the New York urban real-estate developer-cum-imperial president, Donald Trump, so callously positioning Gaza as a utopian urban development project, a kind of ‘California Forever’, freed from the realities of its histories, its complex and ongoing contestations and identity negotiations. Or the synergistic affinities between Tel-Aviv, Singapore and Kigali in terms of defence and

surveillance technologies, e.g., spyware or military equipment traded between these cities (Bishku et al., 2019).

We argue that overlapping urban technologies, infrastructures and tactics seen in NRx urban experiments in California, ‘best practice’ urban planning in Singapore, or new tropical gardens in Kigali, are woven into the global war machine and its wake of urbidal despair. Gaza City emerges as one timely example of the violent power of illiberalism – but often through the sanitised rhetoric of liberal justice - to enclose, structure, and produce space and urban life and death. We position Gaza as a spatial reflection of the operation of wider global urban forces, rather than a standalone case of extreme intensity. In other words, its ghastly destruction reflects the capacity of urban illiberalism to reconfigure the world.

We see these urban machines of politics, infrastructures, mobilities and technologies as synched, and part of a wider urban illiberal condition, notable for its density and scale, ongoing state of crisis, and accelerating, spectacular speed. The planetary illiberal urban condition is nowhere near as much about the discourse as it is about the outcomes witnessed on the ground, and these are outcomes that, as we have argued, span the entire globe. Illiberalism is thus a pervasive urban phenomenon that finds its platforms, communities, and crevices through which to emerge in the most variegated kinds of social settings. And, because cities are denser, faster, more compact, more connected, more digitised/datafied, and more concentrated containers of capital accumulation, decision-making, and social difference, they are also the prime crucibles for illiberal thought and action where such differences and power struggles are fought out in often repressive, undemocratic, and authoritarian forms, sometimes openly, sometimes cloaked in the guise of technocratic liberal decency and so-called progressive values.

When thinking of illiberalism, there is a need to look beyond the concept’s immediately-convenient associations with the noisy ascent of far-right populism and the overt rejection of core liberal values such as diversity, equality, and democratic rule of law. Illiberalism is something more profound that remains couched in cities across the globe, whether we consider the tensions of ‘thrown-togetherness’ in densely built-up and populated urban spaces, discourses and policy decisions anchored in notions of crisis and emergency, the neoliberal market forces driving speculative real estate investments in regenerated downtown precincts, the austerity measures and welfare cuts afflicting urbanites across social strata, or the knots and entanglements of unelected and ‘expert’ stakeholders who bypass democratic governance. Put differently, these features transcend political orientation and narratives, and can be found in various forms and intensities from Barcelona and Brussels to Cairo and Abu Dhabi.

Across our conceptual windows, we have suggested that illiberalism is a globally omnipresent urban temptation that lends itself to implementation perhaps more conveniently than emancipatory and inclusionary forms of liberal governance (and indeed, is an outgrowth in many cases of liberal governance). We do not claim that there are no exceptions, or that democracy does not exist: there are, and it does! Rather, we propose that illiberal urbanism

exists alongside, in tandem with, and is mutually constitutive of, democratic and even progressive institutions, structures and processes.

Urban todays and tomorrows are in competition and are not yet determined. We do not deign to predict the future. This is not to suggest that said phenomena are inevitable and serve as a universal explanatory device, or that illiberal urban futures are linear or predetermined, a point also made by Luger (2020; 2022): illiberal ascendancies are reversible and contestable. However, we are all too often confronted with the illiberal outcomes of the enforcement of market-led urban dynamics.

Just because resisting illiberalism – which we as co-authors advocate for – is difficult, does not mean it is a task not worth undertaking. Lefebvre (1964) argued that democracy is a constant struggle: it is not an underlying state, but rather, a perpetual undertaking to become democratic; but, Lefebvre (ibid) also noted, this becomes harder under the condition(s) of contemporary urban life. Democratic and progressive development requires effort and must be constantly fought for, guarded, and carved out every step of the way. As cities continue to drive societal development, illiberalism will keep showing up, threatening and dismantling democratic thought and action across scales, actors, and spaces both physical and virtual.

Through our intervention, we have thus attempted to open up critical conversations and ask timely questions about the planetary illiberal urban condition today rather than providing conclusive and empirically grounded answers, which is what the next pieces in this *Special Issue* are better placed to address. We thus offer the lens through which they – as well as future contributions in this area of study – can produce sharper images of undemocratic urban processes that we have collectively identified as the urban condition under illiberalism. We hope this work may help point the dial toward more democratic, hopeful urban futures.

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