

Post-Democratic Cities

For Whom and for What?

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“There is a shift from the model of the *polis* founded on a centre, that is, a public centre or *agora*, to a new metropolitan spatialisation that is certainly invested in a process of de-politicisation, which results in a strange zone where it is impossible to decide what is private and what is public” (Agamben 2006).

The city offers a privileged scale for dissecting the social body, for rummaging through the innards of our most intimate fantasies, desires, and fears; for excavating the signs of the city’s political condition. As the ancient Greek polis was for Aristotle and Plato the experimental site for the performance of civic and political life, the contemporary city also holds for us the key to unlocking the contours of the present political constellation. It is indeed unmistakably so that the city has undergone radical change over the past two decades or so, most dramatically in its modes of urban governing and polic(y)ing (Rancière, 1995; Dikeç, 2007). We shall argue that, while the city is alive and thriving at least in some of its spaces, the polis, conceived in the idealized Greek sense as the site for public political encounter and democratic negotiation, the spacing of (often radical) dissent, and disagreement, and the place where political subjectivation emerges and literally takes place, seems moribund. In other words, the ‘political’ is retreating while social space is increasingly colonised by policies (or policing). The suturing of social space by consensual managerial policies and the evacuation of the properly political (democratic) dimension from the urban -- what will be described below as the post-political condition -- constitutes what I would define as the ZERO-ground of politics. The leitmotiv of this contribution will indeed be the figure of a de-politicized Post-Political and Post-Democratic city.

I shall argue that urban governance at the beginning of the 21st century has shifted profoundly, giving rise to a new form of governmentality in the Foucaultian sense of the word, one that is predicated upon new formal and informal institutional configurations –

forms of governance that are characterized by a broadening of the sphere of governing, while narrowing, if not suspending, the space of the properly political. Urban governing today is carried by a wide variety of institutions and organizations. It operates through a range of geographical scales, and mobilizes a wide assortment of social actors, including private agents, designers, architects, and planners, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, corporations, and the more traditional forms of local, regional, or national government. I shall characterize these new regimes of policing the city as Governance-beyond-the-State (Swyngedouw 2005) (Swyngedouw 2008). It is a governance regime concerned with policing, controlling and accentuating the imperatives of a globally connected neo-liberalized market economy. This new ‘polic(y)ing’ order reflects what Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Rancière define as a post-political and post-democratic constitution. In other words, contrary to the popular belief that these new forms of neo-liberal urban governance widen participation and deepen ‘democracy’, I shall insist that this post-political condition in fact annuls democracy, evacuates the political proper – i.e. the nurturing of disagreement through properly constructed material and symbolic spaces for dissensual public encounter and exchange – and ultimately perverts and undermines the very foundation of a democratic polis. This regime exposes what Rancière calls the scandal of democracy: while promising equality, it produces an oligarchically instituted form of governing in which political power seamlessly fuses with economic might (Rancière 2005b) and a governance arrangement that consensually shapes the city according to the dreams, tastes and needs of the transnational economic, political, and cultural elites. Proper urban politics fosters dissent, creates disagreement and triggers the debating of and experimentation with more egalitarian and inclusive urban futures, a

process that is wrought with all kinds of tensions and contradictions but also opens up spaces of possibilities. Exploring these will constitute the final part of this contribution. But first I shall highlight the contours of present-day urbanity.

Post-Political Governance-Beyond-the-State: the Zero-Ground of

Politics

My entry into excavating the constellation of present day urbanity is the large scale redevelopment projects that are dotting the urban landscape worldwide. I take my cue from the emblematic urban interventions that are staged and erected as attempts to reconfigure the urban socio-cultural, economic, and physical fabric in line with the aspirations and dreams of urban elites that prefigure a particular form of urbanity, one that simultaneously redraws the wider and globalizing spatio-temporal co-ordinates in which the city is enmeshed. Whether one considers the Amsterdam-Zuid project, Rotterdam's Kop van Zuid, Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum and the Abandobarra redevelopment, Berlin's feeble attempt to reposition itself as a global city through signature urban reconstruction on Potsdamer Platz, or London's and Barcelona's mission to take spectacular large scale architectural and development cathedrals as the lynchpin to reposition the city as competitive, creative, cosmopolitan and globally connected, they all exhibit, despite their differences, an extraordinary degree a similarity (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). While the reader can come up with his or her own favorite list of cities and their emblematic buildings or projects, the key point is their ubiquitous presence in contemporary urban strategies to plug their city as a vibrant,

cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial, dynamic environment that sits comfortably within a neo-liberal market-driven global competitive urban order.

Of course, these newly built environments express a series of wider transformations and signal, if not manufacture actively, new political, socio-cultural, and economic realities. Contrary to the mainstream argument that urban leaders and elites mobilize such competitive tactics as a response to the assumed inevitability of a neo-liberal global economic order, I insist that these strategies in fact construct and consciously produce the very conditions that are symbolically defined as global urbanism. Equally important, of course, is the question of the institutional and political orderings that permit such emblematic and dramatic interventions to take place. Put differently, the very possibility of a new competitive globalized city requires the reconfiguration of the polic(y)ing order, of the regime of governmentality as Foucault would have it, and is predicated upon a profound transformations of the 'traditional' horizons of urban governance, most notably through the formation of new institutional and civic arrangements that centre around the inclusion of private and other non-state actors in the act of governing. Moreover, these emerging new regimes of urban governance fuse together actors, elites, and institutions not only from the local social milieu, but also from the national or international level. In sum, large scale urban interventions embody in their crystalline structure the very dynamics through which new forms of governmentality, reconfigured elite networks, and new parameters of competitiveness, economic dynamics and spatial linkages are constructed.

Elsewhere, I have defined the newly emerging forms of urban governing as an arrangement of Governing-beyond-the-State (but often with the explicit inclusion of parts

of the state apparatus) (Swyngedouw 2005). They are institutional or quasi-institutional arrangements that are organized as horizontal associational networks of private (market), civil society (usually NGO), and state actors (Dingwerth 2004). These forms of apparently horizontally organized, networked, and polycentric *ensembles* in which power is dispersed are increasingly prevalent in rule making, setting and implementation at a variety of geographical scales (Hajer 2003): 175) (Brenner 2004). These modes of governance frame an emerging new form of governmentality or “the conduct of conduct” (Foucault 1979); (Lemke 2002). It implies a common purpose, joint action, a framework of shared values, continuous interaction and the wish to achieve collective benefits that cannot be gained by acting independently (Stoker 1998), and is predicated upon a consensual agreement on the existing conditions (‘The state of the situation (Badiou 2005a)) and the main objectives to be achieved (‘The partition of the sensible’). This model is related to a view of ‘governmentality’ that considers the mobilisation of resources (ideological, economic, cultural) from actors operating outside the state system as a vital part of democratic, efficient, and effective government (Pierre 2000). In sum, Governance-beyond-the-State is constituted by presumably horizontally networked associations, and based on interactive relations between independent and interdependent actors, that share a high degree of consensus and trust, despite internal conflict and oppositional agendas, within selectively inclusive participatory institutional or organizational settings.

Whilst in pluralist democracy, the political entitlement of the citizen is articulated via the twin condition of ‘national’ citizenship on the one hand, and the entitlement to egalitarian political participation in a variety of ways (but, primarily via a form of (constitutionally

or otherwise) codified representational democracy) on the other, network based forms of urban governance do not have codified rules and regulations that shape or define participation and identify the exact domains or arenas of power (Hajer 2003). As Beck (Beck 1999) argues, these practices are full of “unauthorized actors”. The status, inclusion or exclusion, legitimacy, system of representation, scale of operation, and internal or external accountability of such actors often take place in non-transparent, ad-hoc, and context-dependent ways and differ greatly from those associated with egalitarian pluralist democratic rules and codes. Moreover, the internal power choreography of systems of Governance-beyond-the-State is customarily led by coalitions of economic, socio-cultural, or political elites (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002).

Therefore, existing social and political power geometries are changed, resulting in a new constellation of governance articulated via a proliferating maze of opaque networks, fuzzy institutional arrangements, with ill-defined responsibilities and ambiguous political objectives and priorities. The state still plays a pivotal and often autocratic role in transferring competencies (and consequently for instantiating the resulting changing power geometries) and in arranging these new networked forms of governance.

For Žižek, Mouffe, and Rancière, among others, such arrangements signal the emergence of a post-political and post-democratic condition. They define the post-political as a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars (Žižek 1999a: 35);(Žižek 2006);(Mouffe 2005): “post-politics mobilizes the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content – no wonder that this suffocating closure gives birth to ‘irrational’ outbursts of violence as the

only way to give expression to the dimension beyond particularity” (Žižek 1999b: 204). Post-politics reject ideological divisions and the explicit universalisation of particular political demands. Instead, the post-political condition is one in which a consensus has been built around the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism as an economic system, parliamentary democracy as the political ideal, humanitarianism and inclusive cosmopolitanism as a moral foundation. As Žižek (Žižek 1999b: 198) puts it: “[p]ost-politics is thus about the administration (policing) of social, economic or other issues, and they remain of course fully within the realm of the possible, of existing social relations”, they organize ‘the partition of the sensible’ (Rancière 2000a), the distribution of functions and places. “The ultimate sign of post-politics in all Western countries”, Žižek (Žižek 2002: 303) continues, “is the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension”. Post-politics refuses politicization in the classical Greek sense, that is, as the metaphorical universalization of particular demands, which aims at “more” than negotiation of interests. Politics becomes something one can do without making decisions that divide and separate (Thomson 2003). A consensual post-politics arises thus, one that either eliminates fundamental conflict or elevates it to antithetical ultra-politics. The consensual times we are currently living in have thus eliminated a genuine political space of disagreement. However, consensus does not equal peace or absence of fundamental conflict (Rancière 2005a: 8).

Difficulties and problems, such as re-ordering the urban, that are generally staged and accepted as problematic need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus. “Consensus means that whatever

your personal commitments, interests and values may be, you perceive the same things, you give them the same name. But there is no contest on what appears, on what is given in a situation and as a situation” (Rancière 2003b: §4). The key feature of consensus is “the annulment of dissensus the ‘end of politics’” (Rancière 2001: §32). Of course, this post-political world eludes choice and freedom (other than those tolerated by the consensus). The only position of real dissent is that of either the traditionalist (those stuck in the past and refuse to accept the inevitability of the new global neo-liberal order) or the fundamentalist. The only way to deal with them is by sheer violence, by suspending their ‘humanitarian’ and ‘democratic’ rights. The post-political relies on either including all in a consensual pluralist order and on excluding radically those who posit themselves outside the consensus. For them, as (Agamben 2005) argues, the law is suspended – the ‘police’ order annuls their rights; they are literally put outside the law and treated as extremists and terrorists. That is why for Agamben, the ‘Camp’ is the seminal space of late modernity. This form of ultra-politics pits those who ‘participate’ in the consensual order radically against those who are placed outside. The riots in Paris in the fall of 2005 and the ‘police’ responses (both those by the forces of repression as by the political elites) were classic violent expressions of such urban ultra-politics (for details, see (Dikeç 2007)).

Late capitalist urban governance and debates over the arrangement of the city are not only perfect expressions of such a post-political order, but in fact, the making of new creative and entrepreneurial cities is one of the key arenas through which this post-political consensus becomes constructed, when “politics proper is progressively replaced by expert social administration” (Žižek 2005: 117). The post-political consensus,

therefore, is one that is radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future urban possibilities and assemblages. This retreat of the political into the cocoon of consensual policy-making within a singular distribution of the givens of the situation constitutes, I maintain, the zero ground of politics.

Urban Populism as Symptom of Post-Democracy¹.

This Post-Political condition articulates with a consensual populist tactic as the conduit to instigate ‘desirable’ change. Urban polic(y)ing is a prime expression of the populist ploy of the post-political post-democratic condition ((Crouch 2004), see also (Rorty 2004)) .

Put differently, a depoliticized urban populism has become a key symptom of the post-democratic institutional consensus. We shall briefly chart the characteristics of populism (see, among others, (Canovan 1999; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005; Žižek 2005; Swyngedouw 2007) and how this is reflected in mainstream urban concerns.

Populism invokes ‘THE’ city and ‘THE’ (undivided) ‘people’ as a whole in a material and discursive manner. All people are affected by urban problems and the whole of urban life as we know it is under threat from potential catastrophes (like globalization, non-competitiveness, uncontrolled immigration). As such, populism cuts across the idiosyncrasies of different forms and expressions of urban life, silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and papers over fundamental conflicts of interest by distilling a common threat or challenge. Urban populism is also based on a politics of ‘the people know best’ (although the latter category remains often empty, unnamed), supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy, and advocates a direct

relationship between people and political participation. Populism customarily invokes the spectre of annihilating apocalyptic futures if no direct and immediate action is taken. If we refrain from acting (in a technocratic-managerial manner) now, our urban future is in grave danger. It instils a sense of millennialist angst and existentialist urgency. Populist tactics do not identify a privileged subject of change (like the proletariat for Marx, women for feminists, or the 'creative class' for neo-liberal capitalism), but instead invoke a common condition or predicament, the need for common action, mutual collaboration and co-operation. There are no internal social tensions or generative internal conflicts. Instead the enemy is always externalised and objectified. Populism's fundamental fantasy is that of a threatening *Intruder*, or more usually a group of intruders, who have *corrupted* the system (Žižek 2008). The 'immigrant', 'terrorist', or 'globalization' stands here as classic examples of fetishized and externalized foes that require dealing with if a new urbanity is to be attained. Problems therefore are not the result of the 'system', of unevenly distributed power relations, of implicit or explicit silences and marginalizations, of the networks of control and influence, of rampant injustices, or of a fatal flow inscribed in the system, but are blamed on an outsider, a 'pathological' syndrome that can be cut out without affecting the functioning of the system. Populist demands are always addressed to the elites. Urban populism is not about changing the elites, but calling on the elites to undertake action. A non-populist politics is exactly about obliterating the elite, imagining the impossible. Furthermore, no proper names are assigned to a post-political populist politics (Badiou 2005b). Post-political populism is associated with a politics of not naming in the sense of giving a definite or proper name to its domain or field of action. Only vague concepts like the creative city, the competitive city, the inclusive city,

the global city, the sustainable city replace the proper names of politics. These proper names, according to (Rancière 1995), are what constitutes a genuine democracy, that is a space where the unnamed, the uncared, and, consequently, un-symbolised claim name and (ac)count. Finally, populism is expressed in particular demands (get rid of immigrants, lower taxes, increase ‘participation’) that remain particular and foreclose universalisation as a positive urban project. In other words, the urban problem does not posit a positive and named socio-environmental situation, an embodied vision, a desire that awaits its realisation, a fiction to be realised.

Reclaiming the Political City: Beyond the ‘zero’ ground of urban polic(y)ing

“[T]he political act (intervention) proper is not simply something that works well within the framework of existing relations, but something that *changes the very framework that determines how things work* ... [A]uthentic politics ... is the art of the *impossible* – it changes the very parameters of what is considered ‘possible’ in the existing constellation (emphasis in original)” (Žižek 1999b: 199).

A genuine politics, therefore, is “the moment in which a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests but aims at something more, and starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space” (Žižek 1999b: 208). It implies the recognition of conflict as constitutive of the social condition, and the naming of the urban spaces that can become. The political is defined by Žižek and Rancière as the space of litigation (Žižek 1998), the space for those who are not-All,

who are uncounted and unnamed, not part of the 'police' (symbolic, social and state) order; where they claim their right to the polis. A true political space is always a space of contestation, in the name of equality, for those who have no name or no place. As (Diken and Laustsen 2004: 9) put it: "[p]olitics in this sense is the ability to debate, question and renew the fundament on which political struggle unfolds, the ability to criticize radically a given order and to fight for a new and better one. In a nutshell, then, politics necessitates accepting conflict". A radical-progressive position "should insist on the unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political". (Žižek 1999a: 9) and "always works against the pacification of social disruption, against the management of consensus and 'stability' The concern of democracy is not with the formulation of agreement or the preservation of order but with the invention of new and hitherto unauthorised modes of disaggregation, disagreement and disorder" (Hallward 2005: 34-35); it is about demanding the realisation of the impossible. In sum, as (Badiou 2005b) argues, "a new radical politics must revolve around the construction of great new fictions" that create real possibilities for constructing different urban futures. To the extent that the current post-political condition that combines consensual 'Third Way' politics with a hegemonic neo-liberal view of social ordering constitutes one particular fiction (one that in fact forecloses dissent, conflict, and the possibility of a different future) and reveals its perverse underbelly each times it becomes geographically concrete in the world, there is an urgent need for different stories and fictions that can be mobilised for realisation. A genuine democratic political sequence starts from an axiomatic egalitarian position, recognises conflicting socio-spatial processes and radically different possible urban futures, and struggles over the naming and trajectories

of these futures. It is about re-centring the political as space of dispute/litigation/disagreement.

The courage of the intellectual imagination of progressive urbanites is one of the ingredients in this process of reclaiming political space and of excavating the archaeology of future possibilities. There is a clear agenda here, one that revolves around the ruthless critique of the impossibility (in egalitarian democratic terms) of the neo-liberal utopia.

While the promises of a free-floating, globally interconnected, inclusive and phantasmagorical liberal paradise are clearly endearing and captivating for some, promising that the ultimate realisation of our desires is just lurking around the corner, providing we stick it out until the neo-liberal prescriptions have done their healing work.

While this may indeed be true for some, it invariably brings with it all manner of distortions, inequalities, and new barriers. Consider, for example, how the promise of mobility and the freedom of place are highly and unevenly truncated. While the spatial freedom and mobility of capital in the form of money is virtually frictionless, the freedom to roam the world for capital as commodities is already highly unevenly regulated and organised. For capital in the form of labour force, of course, the most unspeakable mental and physical violence is inflicted upon roaming labouring bodies. We call them immigrants or refugees (once upon a time we called them (guest-)workers identifying them by their class position and assigned socio-spatial function); yet they are one of the crucial forms of capital, a capital that neo-liberals desperately wish to keep in their place and out of the elite spaces. While there is indeed a global world for capital, there are many worlds for others, whose borders are strictly patrolled, policed, and contained (Badiou 2007). The market utopia of a free mobility is one that is only accessible to

some, while others are kept in place and/or outside. All manner of polarising and fragmenting forces divide and separate in a globalising neo-liberal order. My urban Nikes at \$ 140.00 a pair are stitched together in Chinese sweatshops by teenage girls at 13 dollar cent a pair. The spread of capitalism worldwide has propelled the proletarianization process to unparalleled heights. Freeing peasants from their land, of course, permits a freedom to move, to the city, to the global North. The spread of global capitalism and the generalisation of market forces brings therefore unprecedented migration; many of whom are now becoming an integral part of the global north's urban citizenry, yet remain conspicuously absent from the new orders of governing.

The post-political 'glocal' city is fragmented and kaleidoscopic. Mundial integration unfolds hand in glove with increasing spatial differentiations, inequalities and combined but uneven development. Within the tensions, inconsistencies and exclusions forged through these kaleidoscopic yet incoherent transformations, all manner of frictions, cracks, fissures, gaps, and 'vacant' spaces arise (Swyngedouw, 2000); spaces that, although an integral part of the 'police' order, of the existing state of the situation, are simultaneously outside of it. These fissures, cracks, and 'free' spaces form 'quilting' points, nodes for experimentation with new urban possibilities. It is indeed precisely in these 'marginal' spaces -- the fragments left unoccupied and non-sutured by the urban police order that regulates, assigns, and distributes -- that all manner of new urban social and cultural practices emergence; where new forms of urbanity come to life. While transnational capital flows impose their totalising logic on the city and on urban polic(y)ing, the contours of and possibilities for a new and more humane urban form and live germinate in these urban 'free' spaces. These are the sort of spaces where alternative

forms of living, working, and expressing are experimented with, where new forms of social and political action are staged, where affective economies are reworked, and creative living is not measured by the rise of the stock market and pension fund indices. Ed Soja (Soja 1996) defines these spaces as *Thirdspace*, the living in-between space that emerges through perception and imagination; a space that is simultaneously real and imagined, material and metaphorical, an ordered and disordered space. Of course, for the elites, such 'thirdspaces', spaces of unchecked and unregulated experimentation, re-enforce the dystopian imaginary of cities as places of chaos, disintegration and moral decay; excesses that need containment or from which one flees (Baeten 2001). (Baeten 2007). But of course, it is exactly these spaces where hope, new promises, freedom and desires are actively lived. In these cracks, corners, and fissures of the contemporary fragmented networked city looms and ferments a new hybrid conglomerate of practices, often in the midst of deepening political exclusion and social disempowerment. These are the radical margins that are an essential part of twenty-first century urbanity. And it is exactly these practices that urgently require attention, nurturing, recognition, and valorization. They demand their own space; they require the creation of their own material and cultural landscapes, their own emblematic geographies. These are the spaces where the post-political condition is questioned, the political re-treated, and practices of radical democratization experimented with. Their realization requires considerable urban and architectural imagination and creativity. Most importantly, this demands a rethinking of the meaning of citizenship in the direction of the recognition of the multiplicity of identities, the rhizomatic meanderings of meanings, practices, and lives. It also demands the development of visionary urban programs by and for these new 'glocal' citizens of

the polis, those that are simultaneously decidedly local and shamelessly global; those that too often are excluded from the zero ground of the post-political and post-democratic consensus that governs our contemporary cities.

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¹ For further discussion, see, among others, (Swyngedouw 2007), (Swyngedouw 2008) and (Moulaert, Rodriguez, and Swyngedouw 2002)