Democratic Protest in the Neoliberal Age

Preliminary Thoughts on the Silencing of Protest in the Park

On a crisp morning in March 2009, I took part in a demonstration against a proposal to install a novel recreational facility proposed for a major historic park in Glasgow. The brainchild of a commercial company, the ‘Go Ape’ facility takes participants high into the canopy of the trees and through a variety of experiences that – judging from the opinions of those who had used similar facilities elsewhere in Scotland – is fun. It is an experience which does not come cheap. The issue of financial exclusion aside for now, for the protesters its installation in Pollok Park was intrusive; it was not only that screams of masochistic pleasure would permeate an otherwise peaceful area of the park, but that it would be invasive of one of the last remaining areas of forest within a park which had been progressively eroded through earlier planning developments. This, combined with the fact that Pollok Park is a major green lung which at its northern tip brings a relatively wild space within less than three miles of the city centre, meant that it was perhaps inevitable that the proposal would attract opposition.

The demonstration was fixed by its timing to coincide with the site visit to the park arranged for the councillors on the City’s Planning Committee by the Council’s planners, the purpose of which was to acquaint the decision-makers with the nature of the development and its environmental setting. The demonstrators, of which there were about 30, were uninvited – and as it turned out unwelcome hangers on. We were a motley crew: from unemployed factory worker to university professor; to mothers with pushchairs, the elderly as well as the young; some were local activists that council officials would describe pejoratively as the ‘usual suspects’, recidivist participants in local politics, while others had little history of political involvement and would consider themselves apolitical. The common denominator was that all of us were concerned with what appeared to yet another proposal that privatized public space and had its origins far as the councillors were concerned, became a reasonable question and thus beyond debate, a political thesis? As an historical glance over the last few decades would show, the Go Ape protest was just one of a myriad of oppositions that have bubbled up in Glasgow, just as they do in any city, to challenge how the city is to be reconstructed and the policy orthodoxy more generally. If the politics of the city is increasingly invested in a process of “the evacuation of the properly political (democratic) dimension from the urban”14, annulling democracy for a high degree of “consensual agreement on the existing conditions and the main objectives to be achieved [...] within selectively inclusive participatory institutional or organizational settings”15, implying a common purpose and shared values amongst participants, then why? And what strategies have been adopted to ensure that government is projected through such consensual managerial policies?

Furthermore, in adopting neoliberal policies, is a new expression of neopopulist governance emergent in this ‘Governance-beyond-the-State’? Swyngedouw notes that “[p]opulist invokes ‘THE city’ and ‘THE people’ as a whole, in a material and discursive manner”. This “urban populism is also based on a politics of ‘the people know best’ (although the latter category remains often empty, unnamed), supported by the practices of entrepreneurial governance David Harvey discussed some two decades ago16. Following the lead of Mouffe, Žižek, Rancière, and others, here I want to explore whether the politics of the city has in fact become a post-political and post-democratic configuration where, as geographer Erik Swyngedouw outlines, “the post-political condition is one in which consensus has been built around the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism as an economic system” – that is, “a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars (by mobilizing) 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.”17

Proposition 1: Urban Entrepreneurialism as a Post-Political Configuration

It is two decades since David Harvey published his seminal article on the shift towards urban entrepreneurialism as the emergent orthodoxy underpinning how cities were becoming governed in an increasingly globalised and competitive world18, that in “fierce competition with other cities, city governments become curators of their own image as they coordinate aesthetic strategies in a desperate attempt to divert currents of global financial capital.”19 However, “[c]ontrary 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, [Swyngedouw] insists [that] these strategies in fact construct and consciously produce the very conditions that are symbolically defined as global urbanism.”

Hitherto, urban government had been portrayed as an essentially managerial task defined around the processes of planning and managing the city, providing infrastructural, social and cultural services essential to its maintenance, resolving problems of resource allocation, and arbitrating on issues such as planning conflicts. Globalisation and the rise of competitive ‘city-changes: people’ as a whole, accompanied by the new orthodoxy of neoliberal governance defined by the shift from government to governance and the establishment of new forms of economic development associated with reviving local economies including privatization, deregulation and liberalization. For Harvey, urban

advocates a direct (though fictive) relationship between people and political participation. As such, “populism cuts across the idiiosyncracies of different forms of 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”, customarily invoking “the spectre of annihilating apocalyptic futures” where the whole of urban life as we know it is under threat from potential catastrophes “if we refrain from acting (in a technocratic managerial manner) now”. This “enemy is always externalised and objectified (e.g. ‘non-competitiveness’), examples of fetishized and externalized foes that require dealing with if a new urbanity is to be attained”. Importantly, populism is expressed in particular demands that remain particular and foreclose democracy, and, according to Swyngedouw, “are always addressed to the elites. Urban populism is not about (obliterating) the elites, but calling on the elites to undertake action.”

Yet, if we were relatively powerless in being ‘outside’ the formal rule book, what is equally true is that performance itself can challenge how political agendas unfold. Our performance, even if muted by the formal procedures, could politicize the issue where the council had sought to project the proposal as common sense, as beyond reasonable question and thus beyond debate, merely ‘technical’.

The events that morning, together with the other meetings and demonstrations that took place to oppose the Go Ape proposal need to be understood against the wider politics of the city – the Council is effectively a ‘one party city’ led by Labour, the ruling party for all but eighteen months since 1950 – which in Glasgow, as in many other cities, have come to be dominated by the practices of entrepreneurial governance. If a new urbanity is to be attained”, customarily invoking “the spectre of annihilating apocalyptic futures” where the whole of urban life as we know it is under threat from potential catastrophes “if we refrain from acting (in a technocratic managerial manner) now”. This “enemy is always externalised and objectified (e.g. ‘non-competitiveness’), examples of fetishized and externalized foes that require dealing with if a new urbanity is to be attained”. Importantly, populism is expressed in particular demands that remain particular and foreclose democracy, and, according to Swyngedouw, “are always addressed to the elites. Urban populism is not about (obliterating) the elites, but calling on the elites to undertake action.”

How the post-political thesis has been articulated by Rancière, Žižek and others and how it has been developed by Swyngedouw is not unproblematic. Talk of the ‘new’ – a new style of politics – courts the risk of highlighting what appears novel but represents more a continuity, albeit one expressed in alternative terms. Nor does the denial of true political debate deny its emergence in the interstices, in between spaces that have not yet come under the entrepreneurial gaze of the (local) state or in spaces where effective resistance can be mounted. These caveats are important to bear in mind in the following discussion in which it is argued in two propositions that through the rise of urban entrepreneurialism and its populist advocacy a new style of urban governance may be emergent.

Emergent Styles of Urban Governance: Two Propositions

Proposition 1: Urban Entrepreneurialism as a Post-Political Configuration
entrepreneurialism – expressed through the reproduction across cities of enterprise zones, the advancement of place marketing and the competition to hold cultural and sport spectacles, the privatization of public services, the construction of waterfront development – was “embedded in the logic of capitalist spatial development in which competition seems to operate...as an external coercive force.” His arguments were persuasive and, from the place marketing and the subsequent decades, prophetic: urban governance became disciplined into (and re-produced) an assumption that obtaining from competitive urbanism was neither an economic nor a political option. Several decades of urban neoliberal governance have amassed a barrage of evidence demonstrating that its practice is socially divisive and that its odd result is in increasingly polarized and divided cities. This interpretation of urban change is not uncontested – the debate surrounding the changing class structure of world cities and whether this is reflected in evidence of increasing polarization, for example, or the benefits resulting from the use of culture to ‘regenerate’ the city, for another. However, it is precisely because of how neoliberal practices become rolled-out that their impacts harbour differential benefits which are fore-closed to particularized subjects of demand within the framework of existing relations; that is, reduced to localised appetites for the resources placing the hegemony of neoliberalism beyond politics, with Žižek warning “the point is that we now seem to believe that the economic aspect of power is an expression of intolerance.” Whereas a genuine politics “implies the recognition of conflict as constitutive of the social condition”: “A true political space is always a space of equality, in the name of equality, for those who have no name or place...the space for those who are not-All, who are uncounted and unnamed as part of the ‘police’ (symbolic, social, state) order, where they claim their right to the polis.” As Žižek warns, the essentially “post-political approach has achieved hegemonic currency, the only acceptable line of resistance today is that of supposedly marginalized voices to a mysterious capital” and that the arm’s-length politics, which came to be represented by tribal divisions between Right and Left. Thus, the election of ‘wellfarist’ parties saw the initiation of redistributive policies which sought (for example) to ameliorate housing conditions for the working class. In post-World War II Britain, much more extensive programmes of social housing construction, accompanied by other social welfare reforms, became part of the Fordist deal. Local government, particularly the major city councils, became deeply implicated in the delivery of the local welfare state; it was ‘big government’ operating at the local scale in which city governments were the key institutions through which urban politics was conducted. If during its heyday the Fordist consensus was widely subscribed to by the Right as well as Leftist parties, this did not mean that urban politics did not become split along partisan lines reflective of socio-economic class. Nor is it meant to imply that redistributive policies were the outcome of class struggle, but that it was through City Hall that such changes were concretized. The Fordist crises of the early 1970s were to lead to the breaking up of the Fordist consensus, bring the outcomes of post-structuralist and post-autistic critique – there were seismic shifts in the nature of the (local) state accompanied by the unravelling of the state-society relationships centred around state welfarism and the redefine the relationships between state, market and society. It is these shifts which for Harvey became associated with the emergence of urban entrepreneurialism as the state sought to redefine its position in relation to a new round of capitalist development. These changes were accompanied by others, the effect of which was to dramatically reshape the relationships between state and society at the local level. The shift from governance to management changed the structure of how cities were governed; if urban governments continued to be major actors the shift to governance changed the development of managerial partnerships working, the quangoisation of local economic development and other innovations, meant that the governing of cities was no longer pre-ordained between a complex array of institutions, many of which lay outside the conventional play of local democracy represented by liberal democratic institutions. Other shifts were to mark the changed world of British urban politics in the last decades of the twentieth century; in particular the ‘Third Way’ metempsychosis of dominant Left/Right party politics and voting alignments of earlier decades, and the rise of identity and issue-based politics and its crowding out of class as the prime cleavage around which (city) politics focused. These shifts summarise some of the changes associated with the political turn initiated by the end of Fordism. Most have been the subject of considerable debate which a listing is unable to do justice. The point to be emphasized is the fundamentally different world in which emergent neoliberal governance was to be defined and operate within from its Fordist counterpart. Certain principles of government were to remain: for one, the continued centrality given to (local) representative democracy as a key democratic means through which the acceptance of the city was to be conducted. In what many contemporary observers argued as a progressive assault on local democratic institutions was initiated during the Thatcher years culminating in the abolition of the major metropolitan councils in England, including London, even such reforms were not able to suppress the spirit of urban government. Further, towards the end of the 1980s and during Thatcher’s third term, the play of class politics became performed spectacularly through the poll tax. Yet, both the reform of local government structure and of the system of local taxation were part of the wider unfolding canvas of neoliberal transformations affecting how cities were governed and the changing relationships between state, market and civil society. It is against this background, particularly since the election of New Labour in 1997, that the post-political configuration is to be understood. Post-politics” is not meant to be understood in ‘endist’ terms, as the end of politics. Indeed, post-political theorists, such as Chantal Mouffe, would argue that politics – as the construction of the political communities in which we wish to live – is always in construction and contested. Rather, post-politics refers to the emergence of managerial consensus predomination and the New Labour had its conceptual foundations in Third Way resolutions;” and as Swyngedouw argues, presents “a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars,” That is: “The post-political...describes a space of political operation structured by choices relating to micro-political techniques, administrative apparatuses and technocratic management. Operating wholly within the shrunken coordinates of neoliberalism, political agency is constrained to nothing more than a shadow play where decisions can only tinker with the edges of a system whose core ideological structure remains inviolable.” Žižek’s contention is that the struggle of multicultural identity-politics has had a depoliticizing effect, a “transformation of ‘politics’ into ‘cultural politics’; where certain questions are simply no longer asked...like those concerning the nature of relationships of production, whether political democracy is really the ultimate horizon, and so on...;” take a concrete example, like the multitude of studies on the exploitation of either African Americans or more usually illegal Mexican immigrants who work as harvesters here in the U.S. I appreciate such studies very much, but in most of them – to a point at least – silently, implicitly, economic exploitation is read as the result of intolerance, racism...the point is that we now seem to believe that the economic aspect of power is an expression of intolerance. The fundamental problem then becomes ‘How can we tolerate the other?’ Here, we are dealing with a false psychologization. The problem is not that of intrapsychic tolerance...” In the post-political what is discussed on the political agenda is pre-ordained on the basis of fundamental axioms – e.g. of power relationships, how the economy should be organised – being unquestioned and unquestionable. “To claiming to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration ... what remains is only the efficient administration of life...almost only that.” Thus, the inevitability of neoliberalism or the status of liberal democracy as the principle around which the processes of government should be organised become unquestionable in the post-political formation (Žižek proposes we instead summon the courage to reject liberal democracy as a master-signifier and a main political fetish, and seek “actual universality”); it achieves hegemonic currency,” conforming to what Bourdieu refers to as “the common-sense of the day” (the doxa, the contemporary unquestionable orthodoxy. Lahoud: “Swyngedouw clearly marks out the topography of the post-political landscape: the entrance of a managerial logic into all aspects of life, the reduction of government to administration where decision making is seen as a question of expertise and not of political position, the diffusion of governance into a host of non-state actors, the brand management of urban space, the obfuscation of any notion of political action, the particularization of political demands, and the termination of social agendas in planning.” With this “evaporation of dissent” in contemporary urban governance a “neoliberal governmentality...has replaced debate, disagreement and decision with the system of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement and technocratic management (“Swyngedouw”); establishing what is ‘common-sense’ inevitably requires synthesizing
agreement.

For that reason, it is the engineering of this 'conscious' configuration that inevitably becomes of vital importance. It is to this juncture that the arguments of the two propositions here elide into one another; that it is through the employment of techniques of neo-populism that the advantages of consensualism become socially and politically cemented. At the outset, though, Swyngedouw’s account insists on the problematic nature of policies that characterize post-politics, the hollowing out of the political dimension: ‘the polis, conceived in the idealized Greek sense as the site for public politics – that is, the 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 becoming real while social space is increasingly colonised by policies (or policy-making).’

But to see the sign of post-politics in all Western countries is the growth of a managerial approach to government; government is reconceived as a management function deprived of its proper political dimension45,46. ‘[T]hat the way the political space is structured today more and more prevents the emergence of the act. But I’m not thinking of some metaphysical event… For me, an act is simply something that changes the very horizon in which it takes place, and I claim that the current situation closes the space for such acts.’47 So it is not just that political debate is becoming curtailed as to how supposed collective decisions over specific policy concerns are to be made,48,49, but more fundamentally, whether those concerns have a site for public political encounter at all. Thus, the premises on which decision-making is made become excluded, yet it is precisely in their encounter that democratic negotiation might be transformative. The centring of managerial politics, then, accompanies the marginalization of real politics. ‘The problem for [Žižek] is that in politics, again, the space for an act is closing viciously.’

At this juncture it is useful to reframe the extent to which urban neoliberal economic governance has become orthodoxy. Most analysts are in little doubt of ‘the entrance of a managerial logic into all aspects of life, the reduction of government to administration where decision making is seen as a question of expertise and not of political inclusion, the diffusion of governance into a host of non-state actors, the brand management of urban space, the predominance of commercial understandings of political action, the particularization of political demands, and the termination of social agendas in planning.’

In a thoughtful paper50, the US urbanist Robert Beauregard outlined the rules that defined local economic development as it had developed to date (1993) in the practices of local governments and not-for-profit organisations in the United States. Predictably, the attraction of inward investment was the prime objective repeated across the city council, in its capacity as the lead actor amongst institutions, including city governments – is concerned with the advancement of the neoliberal city and the pre-eminence given to the task, which populism has emerged in a new guise as neo-populism in a number of recent histories of local insurgency seeking to challenge governance. Its claim, then, to outlaw ‘real politics’ is not just that economic inequalities have become defined, is simultaneously antithetical to the democratic polity; it is what Rancière and others have defined as postdemocracy.

It is not pretended here that the postpolitical thesis is unproblematic. In particular, it undervalues the role of human agency and of resistance in being able to challenge consensus politics. Its claim, then, to outlaw ‘real politics’ is not borne out by empirical reality; all cities have histories of local insurgency seeking to challenge orthodoxy. Clearly, too, its explanatory power calls out for much deeper empirical scrutiny than is possible here. Yet, the value of the thesis is in its ability to provide clues as to how ‘the protest in the park’ was marginalized by the representatives of the city council as well as to how ‘the protest in the park’ was marginalized by the representatives of the city council as well as to how the space for an act is closing viciously.

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Proposition 2: Urban Entrepreneurialism and its Emergent Neo-Populism

Future historians of British urban politics looking back at the period between the 1980s and the present may be struck by some surprise that the palpable inequalities following from several decades of neoliberal governance did not result in more opposition on the streets. The poll tax riots apart, together with the Brixton and Liverpool riots in the 1980s and the so-called race riots in northern English towns in 2001, what is paradoxical is that street protest in Britain has broken out more among the (visibly) middle class (global) and distant (Iraq) problems than it has on issues that are rooted in structural inequalities and the local. That in the first decade of the twenty-first century Britain is a more unequal society is unambiguously measured through statistics51. Precisely because of its nature, the most visible site of inequalities, where in the finer graining of the post-modern city relative poverty exists in closer proximity to relative affluence than was the case in the modern nation-state, its emergence flatlines.

One possible line of explanation (to the absence of street protest) is to be sought in the changing relationships between state, market and civil society marked out by neoliberal governance through the emergence of a new style of urban politics, neo-populism. The linking of populism to neoliberal governance needs careful explanation; conventionally populism and liberalism would be considered as oxymoronic to one another. Thus, populism and liberalism tend to have opposite conceptions of the state (maximal vs. minimal), national identity (ethnic vs. civic) and of the role of government (social determinism vs. free will) and other key dimensions characterising state, market and society52. Further, where these two tendencies tend to preface discussion of the concept by highlighting its ‘vagueness’,53 populism is highly contested. Its most widely quoted examples – from Latin America, in particular – are the mass movements of the 1970s to the 1990s in Latin America – Memenism in Argentina and Fujimorism in Peru – is not accidental, nor is it contingent, but rather it has become employed as a political strategy to accommodate neoliberal governance. The argument envisages two separate but interdependent spheres in which the political (neoliberal politics) exists parallel to the economic, the neoliberal marketplace. Critically, the role of the state is to bolster not just the marketplace but also itself through a strategy which is designed to weaken democracy, in other words to constrain opposition to the neoliberal project.

Such arguments have not been uncontested, including amongst analysts of Latin American politics.54 Clearly, too, it raises questions as to why electorates disaffected by neoliberalism – in a country with a lower income groups – are willing in effect to vote for it. Tellingly, this is the same question as was posed earlier in relation to British cities, the apparent acquiescence of those less advantaged by neoliberalism who are simultaneously unwilling to challenge it politically, either through the ballot box or through direct action. At this point the neo-pedagogic argument offers explanations through showing how neo-populism is being developed as a new style of politics.

Swyngedouw55 has outlined the methods by which populism has emerged in a new guise as an integral part of the post-political formation. Fundamentally, the state – its component institutions, including city governments – is concerned with the advancement of the neoliberal project and more specifically, for the city, of meeting the exigencies of competitive urbanism. How, then, does city government develop neo-populism as a political strategy in order to do so itself through a strategy which seeks to persuade that its policies are the only and appropriate course of action. In this debate, the threat is globalization whose confrontation is inescapable particularly as it affects everyday. This raises the possibility of talking of the city and the people, and the need for a unified response to meet the challenges of globalization.
The Constraints on Public Participation - Returning to the Protest in the Park

At this point we can return to the story of the ‘protest in the park’ to draw out some of the implications arising from the propositions that have been outlined in order to contextualize the episode, drawing in the interplay of local political processes (in Glasgow) which also help explain why otherwise legitimate protest could be effectively marginalised. The reality of protest is that it has invariably been marginalised by the state, particularly where it runs counter to the political priorities of the state. Rather, the argument of this paper centres around how the state seeks to marginalise opposition by harnessing its subject and through its ability to foreclose political debate. Again, the episode and the longer conflict of which it was part is a rich and complex story in which it is not possible here to present detailed empirical evidence or tease out the nuances of the power relationships that were to unfold. Here, attention is focused on those parts of the neopopulist strategy - the use of discourse and of governmentality – that seek to be persuasive of the city’s overall developmental policy objectives and simultaneously to be able to marginalize political opposition to it.

Fundamental to understanding why the city council enthusiastically supported the Go Ape adventure park and implemented the wider discourses within which the city is envisioned. Within the prime goal of economic regeneration, Glasgow has to confront the physical, economic and social legacy of it having been one of Britain’s, and certainly Scotland’s, major industrial centres. The story of the city’s regeneration begins with the marketing campaign ‘Glasgow’s Miles Better’ in the early 1980s is a familiar one, as was its proactive use – the winning of the bid to host the European City of Culture’ in 1990 to bolster its image. Culture, too, was propounded, could be used as the means of diversifying the economic base. From the economic nadir of the early 1980s – at which point the city’s unemployment was consistently above 10% and well above the Scottish and UK averages, and at which time the city was all but absent from the tourist map – inroads into its perceived economic position have been made. But, although unemployment rates are relatively low (in comparison to say 25 years ago), economic activity rates remain well below the national average36 and, for 2007 Glasgow had the highest paupercity (out of work household income) (ONS) – and questions remain as to the impact of population dispersal – a spate of demolitions has seen the total amount of dwelling units reduced from 81,000 to under 62,000 by 200937. Simultaneously, the city’s marketing agency claims that Glasgow has become a major tourist destination within the ‘city break’ consumer market. Yet, as mentioned earlier following Beauregard38, the job creation says little about the quality of the jobs39 – the actual decline of full-time work and the growth of a part-time labour market – and in spite of the physical transformation of parts of the city – the central area and the waterfront development, in particular – the city remains characterized by high levels of social deprivation40. Indeed, the assertive adoption of entrepreneurialism – the shift in the marketing of the city towards emphasizing retail consumption (‘Glasgow, Scotland with Style’) – has served to further polarize its social division, which some analysts have sought to articulate in revanchist terms41, others in more general language42.

It is an irony that the practice of neoliberalism is a disciplining force, not just for labour and more widely in its social relations, but also it would appear for its advocates and practitioners. Competitive urbanism functions as a racket within which the city is competed into an increasingly competitive process of bidding for inward investment. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the bidding to hold mega-events, including major sports and cultural events. Glasgow is a prime, but increasingly common, example whose record in the field within urban marketing circles is widely cited in paradigmatic terms.43 The city’s marketing agency is engaged in an ongoing process of bidding to host events, on the premise of attracting different types of external tourist attractions of different types, in which precisely because other cities are engaged in it, questioning the premise on which it is based is not a rational option. As an entrepreneurial project – such competitive bidding operates under a racket effect with a high degree of adversarial competition and collective symbolic capital – the process has gathered increasing momentum. This, in turn means that it is a key, and increasingly important, item on the local political agenda. Questioning this strategy is political heresy.

In the efficacious discourses surrounding urban economic development, a consistent trend has been that cities should be ‘attractive’. Whether expressed through urban imaginative44, ‘soft assets’45, the ‘quality of place’46, the essential narrative is that cities need to be ‘attractive’ places in which to live in order to be competitive. The Go Ape facility, and the council’s support of it, is part of the wider argument of constructing the ‘attractive’ city – while affirming market precedence for common good assets. Judged by its financial benefits for the city, the leasing of the land on which it would be built, the care for support was far from obvious. (Added to this, the city’s tenure of leasehold rights to Go Ape, a private company, for a relatively long period, 21 years.) Rather, support was publicly expressed in terms of the amenity it was to offer to both residents and visitors alike. Beyond this, the city planning committee and its key officials also energetically argued, would contribute to the quest to making Glasgow a healthier city. It was an argument that connected with another policy trope around which the city’s future is projected through official discourse (‘Glasgow as a healthy City in which to live’), emphasis to which has been given a pronounced fillip since the city’s successful bidding for the Commonwealth Games in 2014. In other words, the facility bolstered the city’s future as one of the key aspects of the official vision of the future Glasgow; the case for its support became indisputable.47

The city’s case for support was expressed as a consensus understanding; it does so through emphasizing the value of local participation as steering policy. As in other British cities, the city administration in Glasgow has innovated a mix of participatory techniques to trawl for local opinion including citizens’ panels, opinion poll surveys which monitor council performance and attitudes (as, for example, to the holding of the 2014 Games and the ongoing progress achieved by the city council in meeting objectives) and questionnaires targeted at specific policy fields. In 2005 the (then) Leisure and Parks Department of the city council issued a consultation paper and questionnaire on the problems users had of the city’s parks and possible methods in which they could be improved. Of the latter, an overwhelming majority (somewhat predictably) gave their support to ‘improving the facilities in the parks’; it was this response to an otherwise ‘apple-pie’ question that was to become a key popular mandate in justification for council support to the Go Ape application – and to other proposals affecting green spaces in the city.48 Questionnaires were also used by the city marketing agency in an opinion specifically to the Go Ape facility; these too showed support for the proposal. It was not that such survey data could be challenged that is of importance here (which was the case), but rather that it was being used to manufacture consensus towards the proposal. As a plethora of studies have shown, beginning with Aristotle’s49 still quoted ladder analogy, participation, particularly where it is initiated...
through state-led practices, operates at different levels from the tokenistic to scenarios in which there is a real redistribution of power through local devolution⁷² and through the realisation of deliberative forms of democratic engagement⁷³. Realisation of the empowered participatory governance agenda and Wright highlight in the exception; clearly, pre-existing centres of institutional power, urban governments, will be reluctant to involve decision making substantively. Further, to do so would be to undermine the legitimacy representative modes of democratic practice are able to claim. If politics is the negotiation of conflict, the post-political formation is defined around its antithesis, that politics is a managerial task involving the ideology of consensus. Limiting participation to relatively ‘shallow’ forms of democratic engagement averts the problems of conflict. For the city council, the knowledge gained through participation, is at least to some extent the absence of consent and simultaneously to bolster the legitimacy of state action. Its actions were the antithesis of the kinds of engagement envisaged by Callon et al⁷⁴ and in particular of the ‘hybrid forums’ through which dialogue takes place.

The protest, on the other hand, reflected in the city. Its ability to regulate how technologies of power the state could engage, demonstrating its ability to manufacture assent? Is the practice of governance unfolds. As a version of populist as, has been the electoral process had given to the councillor the protest was a challenge to both the mandate the antithesis of the kinds of democratic engagement supporting the dominant political consensus. Limiting participation to relatively ‘shallow’ forms of democratic engagement averts the problems of conflict. For the city council, the knowledge gained through participation, is at least to some extent the absence of consent and simultaneously to bolster the legitimacy of state action. Its actions were the antithesis of the kinds of engagement envisaged by Callon et al⁷⁴ and in particular of the ‘hybrid forums’ through which dialogue takes place.

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48 See, for example, Vila, C.M. (2004) ‘Recycled populism or just more neoliberalism? The myth of Latin American “neopopulism”, Revista de Sociología e Política, 22, 135-151.


58 ‘Class, Agency and Resistance in the Old Industrial City’, Andrew Cumbers, Gazi Helms, Kate Swanson, Antipode Vol. 42 No. 1 2010


62 By comparison with other local authorities in Scotland, Glasgow is characterized by disproportionately high levels of social deprivation. In 2009 the city accounted for 31% of the nation’s most deprived areas (defined officially where more than 15% of households in a local area are disadvantaged across a range of basic needs including income, employment, accessibility to public services) but only 13% of its population. Nevertheless, there are signs that the city’s problems may be declining relatively; in 2006 the comparable statistic had been 34%.


74 Ibid.

