



THE WILEY-BLACKWELL
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
URBAN AND REGIONAL
STUDIES

Postpolitical city

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| Journal: | <i>The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies</i> |
| Manuscript ID | EURS0244.R1 |
| Wiley - Manuscript type: | Entry |
| Date Submitted by the Author: | n/a |
| Complete List of Authors: | Davidson, Mark |
| Keywords: | democracy, governance, politics, urban geography |
| Free Text Keywords: | |
| Abstract: | <p>The contentious concept of the “post-political” identifies the absence of the possibility of structural social reform. In democratic societies, this means that reforms which might reaffirm the founding premise that citizens are equal is silenced and/or prohibited. The post-political city is therefore a space lacking in certain political claims. Conflicts might abound, but these are not framed in ways that challenge the very structures of the society which the conflicts emerge. For example, there are multiple ways in which individuals and groups fight for inclusion. However, it is much more difficult to argue that exclusion might be fundamental to the existing social system. Post-political cities therefore domesticate the potentially unruly side of democratic politics. Once cities were viewed as the crucible of democracy, but many scholars now find the converse relationship to be true.</p> |
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Title: Post-Political City

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Word Count: [2000]

Abstract

The contentious concept of the “post-political” identifies the absence of the possibility of structural social reform. In democratic societies, this means that reforms which might reaffirm the founding premise that citizens are equal is silenced and/or prohibited. The post-political city is therefore a space lacking in certain political claims. Conflicts might abound, but these are not framed in ways that challenge the very structures of the society which the conflicts emerge. For example, there are multiple ways in which individuals and groups fight for inclusion. However, it is much more difficult to argue that exclusion might be fundamental to the existing social system. Post-political cities therefore domesticate the potentially unruly side of democratic politics. Once cities were viewed as the crucible of democracy, but many scholars now find the converse relationship to be true.

Keywords: politics, democracy, social theory, urban geography

Main Text

Introduction

The concept of the post-political is commonly associated with political philosophers and social theorists such as Colin Crouch (2004), Chantal Mouffe (2005), Jacques Rancière (1999) and Slavoj Žižek (2009). All of these theorists have forwarded the idea that contemporary democratic politics have developed a domesticated relationship to social change. Although all these authors use different frameworks to explore this idea, consistent across them is an attempt to understand how political choices are constrained by the perception of necessity. Put another way, there is a common concern that certain forms of social change are now deemed illegitimate.

Scholars interested in processes of urban change have begun to use these ideas in order to understand how the contemporary city is being organized and ordered. In characterizing the policy agendas of the contemporary city, Davidson and Iveson (2015) argue that cities are now commonly governed to be (a) competitive, (b) global, (c) secure and (d) sustainable. All of these goals might be laudable. However, Davidson and Iveson (2015) argue that these objectives have become installed in urban governance in such a way that anything which is not deemed to adhere to them is placed outside of the realm of urban politics. Given this situation, much of contemporary urban politics can be passed

to bureaucrats and experts since a discussion of objectives is viewed to only obstruct the implementation of practices already deemed necessary.

The Post-Political

The most well-developed conceptualization of the “post-political” comes from Jacques Rancière (1999). Rancière began his scholarly career as a student of Marxist Louis Althusser, helping to develop a scientific account of capitalist society. In 1968, Rancière broke from this tradition due to its inability to understand the political unrest that swept across France that summer. Subsequently Rancière developed a number of studies on the working classes, questioning how their identities and practices develop and, critically, how this contrasted to representations of the working classes in Marxian political theory. This work highlighted the question of where and how political demands emerge, if they are not simply a consequence of mounting social antagonisms. Here we encounter the idea of what “politics” are.

In order to define “politics” Rancière (1999) distinguishes it from “policing”. Before outlining these concepts, it is worth noting both the critical importance of this distinction, and its controversies. By distinguishing “politics” from “policing” Rancière attempts to make “politics” refer to a very particular type of social change. Not every form of social conflict can therefore be described as political. This has been described by some commentators (e.g. Beveridge and Koch, 2016) as a needless and, perhaps, dangerous conceptual move. It is seen to reduce and purify politics in a way “negates the in-betweenness and contingency of actually existing urban politics” (ibid. 1). To use the term “post-politics” therefore requires an acceptance of, in this case, Rancière’s (1999) restrictive conceptualization of politics.

Rancière (1999) argues that “politics” refers to a particular type of social disruption; a disruption that concerns the principles of the social order. Rancière (1999) examines the Ancient Greek agora to claim the founding principle of democracy is equality: if democracy means anything, it is the rejection of tribal or divine hierarchies and the insistence that people are equals. Democratic *politics* therefore concern those disruptions that question whether equality is being enacted. Democracies are deemed legitimate because they are founded on a belief in human equality. As such, democratic politics occur when one part of a society – what Rancière often describes as “the part of those with no part” – insists that they are not, in fact, equals within that society. This creates a peculiar situation since democratic societies have to presume equality, and so when a group questions this presumption with an equality claim, there is a disconnection between the speech act (i.e. equality claim) and society (i.e. democracy). Rancière describes this as “the meeting point between police logic and egalitarian logic” (1999, 34).

The police logic is composed of all the rules, norms, laws and expectations that order any society. These logics are always contested and debated. It is not therefore that social conflict does not occur in the post-political society. Indeed, these types of contests might be heightened when politics are denied. The post-political critique therefore tries to specifically identify how certain forms of social conflict – those that question whether all are equal – tend to be silenced or denied. Some scholars studying urban politics have drawn upon Rancière’s distinction between “politics” and “police” to examine how the claims of marginalized groups have been formulated and presented in the contemporary context.

The Post-Political City?

The coupling of post-political and city is not inadvertent. The idea that cities and social orders are deeply intertwined is used by Rancière (1999) to construct his definition of the political. We might therefore expect that cities are where, more than any other place, politics exist. However a growing number of urban scholars have argued that cities are increasingly defined by an absence of politics and the creation of governance processes that serve to entrench the existing police order. Of course the central problem, if this diagnosis is indeed correct, is that political institutions that define themselves as democratic may be constructing governance processes that are anti-democratic (i.e. post-political). The post-political city therefore involves a marginalization of democratic political demands.

The geographer Erik Swyngedouw (2007) has sought to utilize this understanding of political marginalization to identify where democratic demands may re-emerge from. Swyngedouw argues that the “urban police order vitally revolves around a consensual arrangement in which all those that are named and counted can take part, can participate” (64). Inclusion is therefore defining of the contemporary city. Yet this inclusion is based on a “hegemonic consensus that no alternative to liberal-global hegemony is possible” (65). What therefore becomes excluded from this inclusive post-political city is “radical dissent, critique, and fundamental conflict” (65). Governance becomes about the administration of the current societal coordinates. If a reordering of the city is required in order to, for example, reduce carbon emissions to sustainable levels, this reordering must take place within the current liberal-capitalist coordinates. Even if this trajectory does not offer a prospective solution, this existing police order is insisted upon in the post-political condition (see Žižek, 2010).

Mustafa Dikeç (2007) has demonstrated how this process of marginalization is inscribed onto the geography of the city. Dikeç examined the 2005 policing of the unrest and riots in Paris’ banlieues. He found that the exclusion that underpinned the acts of rioting was already part of the governing process. The reigning police logics therefore generate a geographical expression: exclusion did not simply reveal itself via the riots, the governance system had already created it. Paris’ urban margins were therefore already accounted for as problem spaces: “the spaces of the police and spaces of politics are enmeshed. What the state’s statements constitute as ‘badlands’ are also sites of political mobilization with democratic ideas” (ibid. 173). The problem the French government associated with the riots was, of course, a lack of inclusion. The demands presented by protestors were therefore converted into the police logics. This had the effect of denying the political dimension of the events: that residents of the banlieues did not enjoy equal status. In his reading of the banlieues as post-political, Dikeç draws the following conclusion: “the challenge, it seems to me, is to resist the place assigned to them in the police order, and to hear their voices as equals manifesting their discontent and desire to be treated as equals” (177).

Dikeç’s conclusions signal to the ways in which the idea of the post-political city offers not just a critique of the current situation (see Beveridge and Koch, 2016), but also a tool to think about the enactment of democratic politics. Davidson and Iveson (2015) have argued that the post-political critique offers a “method of equality”. This method of equality conceptualizes the city as a political process in three intertwined ways: (a) as *a police order*, (b) as *a space through which politics is staged*, and (c) as *a community of emancipation*. This tripartite understanding of the urban political process is

intended to provide a mechanism for political claims to emerge within the consensus system of governance.

The city is a police order through the ways in which it creates and assigns places. For example, the governance of the city involves assigning people to places, jobs to workers and expertise to problems. Understood as a police order, these governing processes can be de-naturalized and opened up to the presumptive test of equality. This posing of the equality test positions the city as a stage for politics. This is not an argument that certain types of city spaces are inherently places for politics (e.g. the public square), but that every element of the city's geography can become a stage for politics if it is brought into dialogue with the democratic commitment to equality. Here, Davidson and Iveson (2015) differ from Dikeç (2007) and Swyngedouw (2007) in that they do not necessarily preference the identifiable urban margins as the prospective sites of political claims. Finally, the city can become a community of emancipation when we insist on the city functioning as a community of equals who must decide and assign their respective roles. When urban governance is undertaken the post-political critique can therefore bring to front-and-center the insistence on equality. Put differently, this framework gives us a tool to examine whether social ordering in the contemporary city is democratic.

The idea of the post-political city can therefore be described as having two dimensions. First, the post-political city refers to the ways in which certain demands have been silenced by contemporary modes of governance. This silencing has taken place through the prevalent modes of consensus governance (Swyngedouw, 2007) and the geographical ordering of the police (Dikeç, 2007). Second, the post-political city has been used as starting point to rethinking how the city functions as a democratic space (Davidson and Iveson, 2015). While accepting much of the post-political critique, this work has not accepted the inevitable absence of politics. Rather it has attempted to use the post-political concept to focus attention on the necessity and possibility of democratic urban politics.

Conclusions

The post-political city remains a contentious idea. For some, the idea that politics are in some way absent from cities is rejected (Beveridge and Koch, 2016). Others have pushed back against the restrictive definition of politics that Jacques Rancière (1999) developed, preferring instead to understand most forms of social conflict as politics. In order to apply the idea of the post-political city, one must therefore understand and accept the particular conceptualization of politics that underpins it (Rancière, 1999). Otherwise, there is a danger that the idea of the post-political city simply refers to the notion that city are absent of social conflict, ran by technocrats and/or lacking in spaces of debate. This is clearly not the intent behind the idea of the post-political (Rancière, 1999) and the derivative post-political city (Davidson and Iveson, 2015). Yet, it is often how the terms are used. If deployed in the manner intended, the idea of the post-political city can therefore provide a tool to connect the analysis of urban processes to the normative commitments of democratic societies.

SEE ALSO: EURS0067, EURS0090, EURS0460, EURS0243, EURS0477, EURS0271, EURS0355, EURS0366, EURS0395

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