

Presupposing Democracy: Placing Politics in the Urban

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Introduction

The idea of the ‘post-political city’ has entered the lexicon of critical urban studies (Swyngedouw, 2009) influenced by a range of political theorists including, Wendy Brown (2011), Chantal Mouffe (2005), Jacques Rancière (1999, 2006) and Slavoj Žižek (1999), among others. To be clear, the damning diagnosis of the ‘post-political’ or ‘post-democratic’ that emerges from their work does not imply that there is no dissent, that there is only silence. A post-political or post-democratic society may be full of critique, discontent and alterity. The question is: does such critique and discontent equate with the presence of politics? Or is such dissent either contained within a broader consensus on the *necessity* of being ‘global’, ‘competitive’, ‘creative’, ‘sustainable’, and the like (see Davidson and Iveson 2015a). Is it reduced to mere noise or nostalgia that is outside the limits of acceptable debate?

As we’ve noted elsewhere (Davidson and Iveson, 2015), if we go looking for the post-political, we will surely find it. But what does this tell us about the nature of the relationship between the urban and the political – the relationship that sits at the heart of the interventions in this book? When we see the fading prospect of an alternative city, defined by something other than the straight-jacketed entrepreneurialism which seems only to reconfirm a leftist melancholic self-

righteousness, we might ask: is there any prospect of the city on the hill, of a re-politicised city or a re-energised urban politics?

Deeper still, we may ask: is this even the right question for our times and places? Alongside the emergent discussion of the ‘post-political city’, another group of scholars have begun pushing us to question the very ways in which we understand ‘the urban’ and its utility for critical theory and politics. For instance, in their provocative work on planetary urbanization, Brenner and Schmid (2015) suggest that we need to displace the centrality of ‘the city’ in our thinking, in favour of a concern with different forms of urbanization. In his consideration of the political implications (and requirements) of planetary urbanization, Andy Merrifield (2011) asks whether the contemporary focus on the ‘right to the city’ involves a kind of spatial mismatch between the geography of our political ambitions and the geography of our world:

“The right to the city quite simply isn't the *right* right that needs articulating. It's too vast because the scale of the city is out of reach for most people living at street level; and it's too narrow because when people do protest, when they do take to the streets en masse, their existential desires frequently reach out beyond the scale of the city, and revolve around a common and collective humanity, a pure democratic yearning.” (473)

In our own efforts to grapple with these diverse and profound questions about the urban and the political, we have found the work of Jacques Rancière (1999) especially useful as a tool for thought and action. In this chapter, we offer an interpretation of Rancière’s key concepts and approach, and then proceed to draw those concepts into dialogue with the contemporary debates and developments in urban theory surveyed briefly above.

We begin by outlining the central components of Rancière's political theory. We seek to demonstrate how our self-proclaimed democratic societies contain within them a persistent disruptive possibility that resides in the gap between the existing social order and its claim to universal inclusion. This disruptive possibility is realised when people assert their status as equals in the face of social orders that deny their equality. Challenging the tendency towards the 'post-political' is a matter of exploiting this disruptive possibility, through a dissensual process of political subjectification in which people *pre-suppose their status as equals*. The chapter then moves on to identify and examine the spatial, and distinctly urban, implications of this approach to politics. The equality pre-supposition, we argue, has two distinct but related spatial pre-suppositions. First, we show how the enactment of the equality pre-supposition necessitates a parallel pre-supposition of the existence of a *stage* for the political claim. As we will see, urban public spaces therefore continue to have a vital, though not exclusive, role in the political process. Second, we show how the enactment of equality also pre-supposes a *common space* whose terrain is not fixed or contained, but is open to division and the disruption of existing forms of order and authority. Although a democratic community must be presumed to exist, usually somewhere, we argue that we cannot make presuppositions about the agents and subjects in this community who might enact a political claim. The final section of the chapter reflects on the implication of this reading of urban politics and signals the problematic, and somewhat under-examined, connection between political claims and socio-spatial reordering.

Politics, the Particular and the Plebs

The basics of Rancière's (1999) theory of politics can be outlined using three concepts: politics, police and democracy. Within this triad, politics is defined in contrast to the police. Rancière's

usage of the police/policing distinction closely relates to Foucault's (1977) theory of power. Policing, for Rancière, is not state-based. Rather it is a set of hegemonic arrangements that serve to assign social roles, and to regulate who can speak, make decisions, perform certain functions and define what is possible. Policing is "thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of way of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task" (Rancière 1999: 29). Policing is therefore not a purely disciplinary process, but is a "system of self-evident facts" (Rancière 2004: 13). It emerges as "a configuration of occupations and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed" (ibid.: 29) – a configuration that Rancière calls the 'distribution of the sensible'. It is premised on the naturalisation of forms of authority that allocate these 'occupations' a part in the social order according to undemocratic principles like wealth, race, gender, expertise, etc. The police order, then, positions subjects in relation to one another, and also allocates peoples and activities across space. As Dikeç (2005: 186) argues: "[S]pace is pertinent to the police because identificatory distribution (naming, fixing in space, defining a proper place) is an essential component of government". The police operates in and through space, the allocation of names and roles being intricately related to geographical identity and emplacement (also see Soja 2010).

Politics is defined in distinction to the regulatory function of the police. Politics is a particular type of contestation that emerges from within a policed order. A contestation within the police order becomes politics when an activity "shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination" (Rancière 1999: 30). The central concept Rancière (1999) uses to frame political change is equality: "politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part. It begins when the equality of anyone and everyone is inscribed in the liberty of the people" (123). An equality claim disrupts

the police order by claiming it is unjust: “Wrong is simply the mode of subjectification in which the assertion of equality takes its political shape” (39). Politics therefore revolve around the recognition and signification of an inequality that is inconsistent with a pre-supposition of equality. In identifying “the part who have no part”, politics works to expose the inequality of a given distribution and thereby de-legitimate the existing police order.

Rancière (1999) illustrates this operation of politics using the example of the Roman plebeian revolts (*Secessio plebis*) on Aventine Hill. While traditionally interpreted as simple revolts articulating dissatisfaction, Rancière looks to Pierre-Simon Ballanches’ early 19th century revisionist interpretation to read the revolts as politics. The conflict between the plebeians and patricians centres on the former refusing to assist the latter in the defence of the city. This refusal was manifest as a plebeian abandonment of the city. The plebeian refusal was insisted upon until the Roman patricians recognised the plebeian right to participate in government. Refusing to operate within a social system that did not grant them this role, the plebeians left the city and established their camp on Aventine Hill. There they created their own council, an act Rancière describes as the “staging of a nonexistent right” (*ibid.*: 25). In establishing a governing body the plebeians contravened the police order they had walked away from. They had spoken (and governed) when they had been allocated roles that did not grant them this right. When forced to talk with the plebeians, the patrician’s Consul Menenius is described by Rancière (*ibid.*: 33) as unwittingly demonstrating their equality. Consul Menenius confronts the plebeian body and explains to them their role as stupid servants. The crucial mistake Menenius makes is that in explaining to the plebeians’ their subservient role, he grants them a status of equality by assuming they are “speaking beings” (*ibid.*: 33). The plebeian act of establishing their own order leads to another distribution being established: “the plebeians have actually violated the order of

the city.” (ibid.: 25). That is, the plebians did not so much demand equality, they *pre-supposed* their own equality and acted on that pre-supposition. (This pre-supposition of equality will be crucial to the way we articulate the relationship between politics and the urban in subsequent sections of this chapter.)

The lesson Rancière draws from this episode is that plebeians’ equality claim transforms the entire distribution by reallocating the existing structuring of places: “Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two words in a single world” (ibid.: 37). In developing this example Rancière presents politics as disruptive: “The specificity of politics is disruption, the effect of equality as the litigious “freedom of the people” (ibid: 70). A democratic society is therefore one of punctuated disruption. A society can claim to be democratic when it has the capacity to recognise equality claims and re-inscribe a police order so that it reflects the founding principle of politics: equality. Politics can therefore take place anywhere, but it is not in evidence every day. Further, while politics transforms the police order, it does not remove processes of policing from the social. New police orders inevitably emerge from the political process, only themselves to be then the potential target of further instances of politics and verifications of equality.

The attempt to extract lessons about the (urban) political from moments like the plebian revolt begs the question: what does the relationship between the urban and the political look like today, in our times of mega-cities and capitalist globalization? A story from ancient Rome evokes a very particular kind of urban formation that seems quite distant from the urban formations of our own times and places. Can a political theory that draws its lessons from such episodes have any

relevance for politics in contemporary cities with their complex flows of capital, labour, resources, cultures and beyond?

Rancière (1999; 2007) argues that today, in our increasingly “post-political” times, the essence of politics is being lost. While we continue to valorise the workings of a corrupted set of institutional mechanisms, he claims the reasons for their very existence and their source of legitimisation are now displaced. In this “post-democratic” era disruptive equality demands have been de-legitimated. They have been replaced by an “idyllic state of politics” that “generally goes by the name of consensus democracy” (Rancière 1999: 95). The notion of post-democracy – or the post-political (Žižek 2006) – develops from the idea that properly (political) disruptive demands have been erased, discredited and/or suppressed by an insistence on consensus within the established police order.

Consensus presumes the possibility of inclusion within the established order: “What indeed is consensus if not the presupposition of inclusion of all parties and their problems” (Rancière 1999: 116). This presupposition “prohibits the political subjectification of a part of those who have not part” (ibid. 116) in such a way that exclusion can only be addressed within the very police order that produces the exclusion. In the post-democratic climate, institutional and legislative arrangements that are seen as the mechanisms and guarantors of democracy now cultivate an adherence to the police order through the imposition of consensus.

One way to think about the relationship between space and politics is therefore to consider it as having been simply erased. Without politics, this relationship cannot exist. As Slavoj Žižek (2006:117) has argued: “In the age of ‘post-politics’, when politics proper is progressively replaced by expert social administration, the sole remaining legitimate sources of conflict are cultural (religious) or natural (ethnic) tensions”. And yet, the post-political critique is not directly

concerned with a lack of capacity. Rather it is concerned with an inability to articulate certain (political) claims within the consensual context. If we are to understand – and perhaps to rekindle – the relationship between the urban and the political today, we must therefore seek to understand how political claims emerge in relation to the spatial organization of our societies. Here, what we take from Rancière especially is his emphasis on the pre-supposition of equality as the foundation of the political, and we ask: what form might such pre-suppositions take today, and how might they relate to contemporary patterns of urbanisation?

Politics and the Urban

In what follows, we articulate two related but distinct intersections between the urban and the political for our contemporary urban experience. Across the broad field of urban studies, and not for the first time, the integrity of ‘the city’ as an empirical and conceptual category has recently come into question. This questioning has taken a variety of forms. All start with the idea that anything we might describe as a ‘city’ is inevitably the product of economic, social, cultural political and ecological processes that extend beyond its putative boundaries. In general terms, the identity of any place we call a city is not fixed or essential to it, but the product of relations that stretch across space. Some interventions on this topic have emphasized the diversity of these relations and the different kinds of cities they produce (e.g. Massey 2005, Robinson 2006). The most provocative interventions in these discussions argue that these relations are now planetary in scale, such that it is no longer enough to contest problematic ideologies of the city as a bounded, universal spatial entity. Brenner and Schmid (2015: 154) worry that even relational approaches to the city persist in problematically “viewing the unit in question—the urban region

or agglomeration—as the basic focal point for debates on the “urban question””. They advocate instead that we dispense with “city-centric epistemologies” (ibid.: 169).

We have argued elsewhere that while relational approaches to the urban question are vital for understanding and transforming our urban reality, ‘the city’ remains a useful concept, so long as it is kept in dialectical relationship with ‘the urban’ (Davidson and Iveson, 2015b). Yes, urbanization involves relations and processes that stretch well beyond the boundaries of any place we might refer to as a ‘city’. And yet, ‘cities’ persist also as ‘things’, even in their diversity. Here, we prefer Harvey’s (1996: 50) formulation that “that ‘the “thing” we call a “city” is the outcome of a “process” we call “urbanization””. The urban, in other words, is simultaneously process and object, imagined and material, relational and relative. And crucially, for our purposes, the urban relates to the political across these distinct but related manifestations. So, when Rancière says that “The call for equality never makes itself heard without defining its own space” (Rancière 2007: 50), this can have at least two distinct but related meanings for us today. In what follows, we elaborate on two intersections between the urban and the political which reflect the duality of the urban as both a ‘thing’ and a ‘process’ (Harvey 1996; Davidson and Iveson 2015b). First, we discuss the urban as a stage for the political. Second, we discuss the urban as a horizon for the political.

The Urban and the Political Take 1: The City as a Stage for Politics

For Rancière, politics consists of a confrontation between the police logic and the logic of equality. How are such confrontations enacted? At various points in his work, Rancière draws on theatrical concepts to elaborate on the ways in which such confrontations take place. He argues

that such confrontations depend upon the construction of a *stage* where actors can establish themselves as parties to a disagreement. There is a complex circularity to this argument – the staging of politics depends upon the existence of such stages, but such stages do not pre-exist politics. In *Disagreement*, he suggests that:

Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it. It must first be established that the stage exists for the use of an interlocutor who can't see it and who can't see it for good reason *because* it doesn't exist (Rancière 1999: 26-7).

So, one way in which the enactment of equality 'defines its own space' is the manner in which it both pre-supposes the existence of a stage upon which parties might confront one another as equals, and produces such a 'stage'. Just as the pre-supposition of equality is crucial to its particular verifications, so too *the pre-supposition of a stage through which those verifications can be articulated* is crucial to the political.

What kind of relationship does the city have to this staging of politics, as formulated in Rancière's work? In Rancière's view, *any* space has the potential to become a stage for politics, if and when another space is articulated within that space, such that a confrontation between the police and politics is enacted:

What makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing solely through being divided (Rancière 1999: 30).

This staging of politics confronts the police order by asserting the presence of another world within the existing distribution of the sensible. In the political process, a configuration or

distribution of spaces that was once deemed natural and uncontested becomes a matter of disagreement. From this perspective, cities as ‘things’ offer no ontologically privileged sites for the enactment and staging of political claims.

And yet, while any ‘where’ can potentially be a stage for politics, it is also clear that certain kinds of sites in cities (understood here as a kind of ‘thing’) seem to remain significant for politics across diverse historical and geographical contexts. In recent years, once again, urban ‘public spaces’ like city squares, parks and streets have been crucial spaces for political subjectification and for the staging of political claims about ‘the people’ (Davidson and Iveson, 2015b). Sites like Tahrir Square (Cairo), the Puerta del Sol (Madrid), Zuccotti Park (New York), Gezi Park (Istanbul), and Syntagma Square (Athens) are among many such sites to have come to global attention in recent years as sites associated with political dissensus. How, then, might we explain the persistence of such urban public spaces as stages for the political, if there is no privileged or proper site for politics?

For us, the persistent mobilisation of such spaces points to one of the ways in which the political and the urban intersect. A political imaginary premised on the pre-supposition of equality depends upon a *geographical imaginary* which pre-supposes the existence of certain (kinds of) places where the disruptive possibility inherent in the social order can be realised, and where politics can be staged (see also Iveson 2007, Warner 2002). In enactments of politics, the declaration of equality both pre-supposes and creates a public space: “I declare, I demonstrate: something appears in a public space and constructs a specific public space by so appearing” (Rancière 2016: 122). In the occupation of *urban* public spaces, we clearly see this geographical imaginary at work. The designated or normalised ‘publicness’ of some spaces within cities is a

valuable political resource for the politics of equality. This ‘publicness’ is not an ontological essence or even a characteristic of their everyday use. Rather, the publicness of such spaces is both (a) a pre-supposition that activists have used to legitimise and organise the appropriation of certain spaces that are ‘meant to be public’ for popular assemblies and occupations, and (b) a (temporary) characteristic that is produced through those very assemblies and occupations (see also Butler 2015, Mitchell 2017). As such, these urban sites can function to illicit a presumption of democratic equality and therefore offer an important vehicle to articulate a political claim. The announcement of an equality claim in certain public spaces can serve to insist that a dialog about the claim takes place with reference to the world-in-common.

So, while we would not claim that urban public spaces are either ontologically privileged in relation to other spaces, or that they operate in isolation to other spaces,ⁱ we do think that particular kinds of urban public spaces have a persistent attraction as stages for the enactment of politics. Over the past decade, there have been numerous political events where urban public spaces have served this purpose. As such, there is a sense in which the city as a ‘thing’ remains crucial for the political.

The Urban and the Political Take 2: The Urban as a Community of Equals

The second intersection between the urban and the political is less about the *mechanics* of staging political claims, and more about the *geography of the community of equals* that Rancière suggests is at the heart of democratic politics. Put crudely, we might ask: does it still make sense to think of ‘the city’ as the horizon of political efforts to enact equality, when the processes that

produce our urban condition stretch well beyond ‘the city’ as such? This gets us to the second half of our urban dialectic, relating to the urban as process rather than the city as a thing.

To talk of urban or city politics can sometimes evoke the idea of a bounded political community, somewhat like the Roman example discussed earlier. Of course, this idea has been subject to considerable debate in an era of globalisation (e.g. Harvey 1997; Brenner and Schmidt 2015).

For many, localised or even national scale politics have become inadequate due to transformed global conditions. Harvey (1997:324) has argued (drawing on Raymond Williams’ phrase “militant particularism”) that localised movements often become diluted and diminished as they are extrapolated: “The potentiality for militant particularism embedded in place runs the risk of sliding back into a parochialist politics”. In an era of profound capitalist integration, Harvey’s (1997) concern lies with the necessity to formulate a socialist politics that can avoid becoming defined by parochial interests and engage with the contestation of global economic conditions.

Others have argued against Harvey’s call for a transcendence of the local. In Doreen Massey’s (1991; 2005) extensive writings on the politics of place, the couplings of local/global and concrete/abstract (i.e. politics) embedded in Harvey’s (1997:184) work are thoroughly critiqued:

“The global is just as concrete as is the local place. If space is really to be thought relationally then it is no more than the sum of our relations and interconnections, and the lack of them...”

Massey rejects Harvey’s “problematic geographical imagination” (ibid.) in that she sees it carving up the world into spatial categories that do not reflect the co-constitution of local and global. Such criticisms have generated interest in developing more relational understandings of space and politics: “Conceptions of the spaces of the political as the products of flows and networks have become increasingly influential both in geography and across the broader social sciences” (Featherstone 2007:432; see Jacobs [2011] for review of the relational turn in urban

geography). The move away from scalar and localising framings and towards more relational understandings of political constitution has, for some, resulted in a rethinking of political subjectivity. For example, Hardt and Negri's (2004) theory of multitude is based on a flat, networked conception of space where politics must transcend place and the particular to be subsumed into the necessary diffusiveness of the multitude: "Here is a non-Eurocentric view of the global multitude: an open network of singularities that links together on the basis of the common they share and the common they produce" (129).

Recent theorisations of transnational and networked politics are also connected to the rethinking of state and power. Much of this work has sought to understand the geographies of state within the context of globalisation (Brenner 2004). Although some have attempted to understand the changing geographies of state – and by extension politics – as a rescaling process (ibid.), others have rejected this framing. Allen (2004:19) has argued that state power is not scalar, but rather a topological arrangement constructed "as a relational effect of social interaction where there are not pre-defined distances or simple proximities to speak of". Power neither exists at the local or global level, but is a mediated relation with multiple spatial forms. As a consequence we find that points of/for politics become multiple across the networked relations: "the mediated relationships of power multiply the possibilities for political intervention at different moments and within a number of institutional settings" (ibid:29).

Harvey's (1997) concern with militant particularism here becomes radically transformed since every space is by definition part of the wider network relation. The problem of identifying the geography of politics becomes a question of connection (Amin 2002). A choice of local or global politics is dispensed of: "a richer spatial politics may also be constituted through the actions of those close at hand working in alliance with others more distant from the immediacy of power's

presence” (Allen 2004: 29). An appropriately global politics is to be found within already existing networks.

Topological accounts of power therefore attempt to transcend the local/global frame (Allen and Cochrane 2010). State power becomes arranged in ways that are “multiple, overlapping, tangled, interpenetrating, as well as relational” (ibid:1087). The state loses its scalar integrity and becomes a “structural effect” (Mitchell 1991) that exerts power through a host of techniques. One consequence of this reading is that it becomes necessary to identify state power in a variety of spaces and practices often not associated with politics (e.g. Painter 2006; Peck 2003). State power operates in a potentially endless list of venues and, as such, points of contestation and struggle become similarly numerous. The geographical question associated with achieving political change is therefore not about an appropriate scale, but rather is concerned with identifying those points and relations within topological arrangements that are most effective with respect to generating political change (Allen and Cochrane 2010; Amin 2002).

This rethinking of space/politics often understands politics as being every day and everywhere. Politics map onto power (Foucault 1977) and, therefore, seeking the “right” type of politics or (political) space appears futile. But Jacques Rancière (1999) rejects such a reading. For him, it is not so much that politics is ‘everyday’ and ‘everywhere’, but that politics have the *potential* to take place anytime and anywhere. While aspects of Rancière’s (1999) political theory map onto relational theories of politics and space, his approach demands a concern with particular enactments of politics *and* space. This linkage has to be established, it cannot simply be assumed as an allegory of power.

Mustafa Dikeç (2001; 2005) has drawn upon Rancière’s conceptualisation of politics to reconsider the dominant ways in which geographers understand the relationship between space

and politics. Dikeç's (2005: 172) reading rejects an "understanding of politics merely as power relations". The short-circuit of power relations equating to politics is replaced by an argument "that space becomes political in that it becomes the polemical place where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated" (ibid.). When a political contestation is staged it requires a space of articulation: "Space is pertinent to politics because it is this very distribution, this very partitioning of space, that is put into question" (ibid.:186).

Dikeç (2005; 2007) therefore poses different questions of the space/politics relation. The geography of politics is not principally concerned with scales or relations and instead is initially focused upon identifying excluded spaces (i.e. unequal spaces) within a hegemonic socio-spatial arrangement. In being able to articulate exclusions within the socio-spatial arrangement it becomes possible generate politics: "Space becomes the place from which to become actors of democratic pronouncements" (Dikeç 2005: 186). Reading politics through Rancière positions Dikeç's interpretation of space/politics as primarily concerned with forms of socio-spatial exclusion and their ability to articulate political claims.

Politics has no proper scale, because it enacted in relation to wrongs that might exist at any scale – from the institution, to the neighbourhood, to 'the city' and beyond to the 'planet'. And yet, as above in our discussion of the staging of politics, this is not the end of the matter. What is required for politics to 'take place' is a capacity to disrupt existing spatial orders and their associated essential identities. Politics does not emerge from a unity, but acts and makes claims upon such unities in the name of the 'parts who have no part' in those unities.

So, while is not a privileged scale of the political per se, perhaps the very idea of the urban as relational space (the second half of our urban dialectic) is a particular resource for the political imaginary? Perhaps, in contrast to parochial unities that are frequently imagined with respect to

the neighbourhood (and its associated fixation with ‘the locals’) and the nation-state (and its associated fixation with the need for unified national identities and values), the urban imaginary has a particular utility for the political imaginary? Precisely because urbanization involves constant comings and goings, because its spatiality is defined not by territorial fixedness but by cross-cutting mobilities and relations, maybe the very idea of the urban lends itself pre-suppositions of equality defined through strangerhood and dissensus, rather than common identities and consensus? As Rancière puts it, the community of equals has a distinct form that distinguishes it from a community bound by blood or ties to territory:

“equality shapes and defines a community, though it must be remembered that this community has no material substance. It is borne at each and every moment by someone for someone else – for a potential infinity of others. It occurs, but it has no place.”

(Rancière, 2007: 82)

This matter of spatial relations and connections that stretch beyond any bounded urban territory may seem to be a very contemporary development. And indeed, the diversity and intensity of such connections may well be stronger now than in the past. But this issue has always been present in intersections between the urban and the political, even from antiquity. In the opening pages of *On the Shores of Politics* (2007), Rancière sees Plato’s attempt to tame the political as an attempt to ground governance in a bounded territory – which in the case of Athens, necessitates a futile attempt to exclude the comings and goings of the nearby port that sustain the city itself. This effort to situate politics through ‘enclosure instead of the open sea’ is a hopeless one, he says: “The *almuron*, the tang of brine, is always too close. The sea smells bad. This is not because of the mud, however. The sea smells of sailors, it smells of democracy” (2007, 2). His point is that claims for equality and dissensual enactments of democracy do not simply emerge

from marginalized members of some pre-existing political territory. Rather, they call into question the very idea of a bounded political territory within which all things can be included and accounted for.

Conclusions

We have therefore moved a little closer to explaining why cities seem to have persistent political relevance in a world of connections and networks. Still, geographical questions remain. If we recognise that any police order contains a particular spatial form with respect to the ways that it allocates roles and assigns place (Dikeç 2005), we are left the questions of how to change this ordering and what an emancipated spatial arrangement looks like. It is one thing to identify why (urban) space still matters for politics, it is another to understand how (urban) space can help transform social orders! Perhaps one clue to the answer to this question comes with the recognition that equality must always be assessed within the particular; there is no universal form of equality – in the social or spatial dimension – to be established. Proffering static utopian urban solutions can therefore only promise the end of equality, since, for Rancière (1999), equality is a democratic commitment not a particular socio-spatial arrangement.

In this chapter we sought to articulate a relationship between the urban and the political that engages with recent debates about the nature of both. In effect, our dual claim is that a dialectical concept of the urban as both ‘thing’ and ‘process’ is a helpful resource for the political, and that Rancière’s (1999) approach to the political helps us to better understand how that dialectic might be democratized through verifications of equality. We’ve made this claim by spatialising Rancière’s approach to the political, showing how the pre-supposition of equality that is central

to his contribution is also a spatial pre-supposition in two related senses: to enact equality is also to pre-suppose (i) the existence of a stage and (ii) a community that is only produced through such enactments.

The urban is both a site and a subject of the political, but these connections between the urban and the political are not ontologically fixed or guaranteed. Social scientific attempts to fix the site or scale of the political through theoretical or empirical investigation will always fail to completely grasp the processional constitution of space and politics. The purpose of our critical urban research ought to be to contribute to the development of democratic political imaginaries and enactments, not to dictate their proper place or orientation. As much as this will require us to interrogate the specifics of our particular urban condition, it will also inspire us to see the connections between our own demands on the present and the actions of others across distant spaces and times – perhaps even the plebs of Ancient Rome.

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ⁱ Of course, the staging of claims through assemblies in, and occupations of, cities also frequently mobilises mediated forms of address. While we would not go so far as Wark (2016) in his suggestion that “The thing to occupy is media time; the way to do it is to take space”, there is clearly a deep relationship between the city and the media that has only become more intense with the recent growth of mobile media technologies and platforms.