Chapter 13

Urban Politics as Parallax

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We have set out in this book to reconsider urban politics, as a topic of urban geographical scholarship. Central to our approach is the multidimensionality of such politics. In our introduction we argued, following Žižek, that a critical eye on urban politics would not only acknowledge but also seek a parallax view: a viewpoint on the topic that is beside, beyond, and outside of the first, primary, obvious, and perhaps default and customary perspective(s). Such parallax imagery is useful because it reminds us that to see another viewpoint, we sometimes have to completely suspend the viewpoint we already have. Yet even the parallax is limiting, since it implies a double-sided image. The chapters in this volume together point to the ways that our views on urban politics cannot be even two-sided; but instead are multi-dimensional. They collectively highlight the importance of taking a viewpoint in order to see something, and encourage our exploration of alternative lenses for seeing and investigating urban politics.

At the outset of the book, we presented three entry positions to urban politics – that of setting, medium, and community – which offer different pathways to seeking the view that isn't obvious. As we unpack here, however, from that starting point, our contributors point to further shifts in view that prompt new perspectives and understandings of urban politics. What is important to understand in all of this shifting is that the questions that we start with, and the assumptions that we make about where

we find urban politics, will shape our subsequent understandings of it. The key point is therefore that we require a process of continual critical reflection upon the questions of what is urban and what is political in order that we make sense of the actors, relations, and places that comprise and condition cities and citizens. Only with such a process in place can we avoid the trappings of a singular or limited set of viewpoints that might themselves serve to limit the potential for political change.

A primary theme for our examination of urban politics comes out of the very first set of chapters, and is echoed again in subsequent ones. This theme is that, even as a setting for politics, urban politics cannot be adequately conceptualized as contained in a singular place-that-is-urban. In the first section, the chapters by Katherine Hankins and Deborah Martin, Kevin Ward, and Kathe Newman and Elvin Wyly each point to the ways that urban politics are simultaneously experienced, practised, and waged over specific conditions of the city – local concerns like housing, garbage collection, and land-use planning – and yet these local issues are always bound up in conditions and relations of multiple locations and scales. The fixity or boundedness of a thing called urban politics is immediately called into question in these chapters, and in later chapters like Mark Davidson's and Matt Huber's. The authors do not seek to do away with conceptualizing urban politics, but they insist that investigation of particular cases of a local requires looking beyond, seeking out the ways that seemingly grounded neighbourhood or city-specific planning lies in relationships, economic, and ecological processes far beyond the city limits, that necessarily shape the experience of the local and the politics of making 'local' choices.

The chapters by Hankins and Martin, on neighbourhoods as a site for urban politics, and Newman and Wyly, on the localization of global mortgage finance,

perhaps represent polar opposites in the question of urban-as-setting for politics. Yet a closer look reveals the ways that urban and global, local and relational, mutually and fluidly co-constitute through power relations and decision-making, or ordering and categorizing of urban land and its uses. In the first, the setting is unabashedly local urban consumptive practices of city residents: neighbourly relations, housing acquisition, and urban services like garbage collection (neighbourhood as the site of collective consumption). In such a view, neighbourhood politics that enrol the local state in (improving) service provision are indeed a hallmark of urban politics. Hankins and Martin interrupt this primarily local view of neighbourhood, however, to consider how the conditions of any neighbourhood come from its situation in relation to processes within and far beyond it; especially in the case of the poor inner-city neighbourhoods that are the sites of their study of 'strategic neighbouring'. Their conclusion, that politics are only contained and assertive of a structural (organizing) status quo when they are situated in neighbourhoods, evokes the very processes that Newman and Wyly unpack; processes of financial markets that, far from being aspatial and inattentive to local place, respond to and re-inscribe the conditions of place. As Newman and Wyly state in relation to understanding the conditions of poor neighbourhoods:

> [T]he problems within communities look local, fragmented, and caused by the people in these places. An urban politics of finance can tie these local experiences together to systematically understand the policy choices made that constructed a political economy in which the foreclosure crisis was possible.

The significance of this parallax view of urban politics as not really neighbourhood, but relational, simultaneously setting and process lies in the examination of actors, processes and playing out; that is, in the ways that specific processes or relations find

material expression in urban places with consequences for the social and political relations both here and there, urban and regional/national/global. The seemingly local politics of place, then, are indeed urban politics, ones that evoke attention to processes of place production and neighbourhood differentiation.

Our second theme emerges in the interstices of Section 1 'Setting' and Section 2 'Medium', as the chapters shift to the power relations and dynamics of politics. Here, the theme is how the formal structures of government situate urban politics as medium – a means to enact municipal policies – even as they enrol broader processes and shape what is accepted as local and political. As chapters by Kevin Ward, Kurt Iveson, Donald McNeill, and John Carr demonstrate, the formal setting of local government is not only means for power, but a medium through which power and decisions are framed – an enforcing mechanism for understanding and shaping 'urban' and 'politics'. As Kevin Ward illustrates, the operations of politics entail intersecting and coalescing processes into place (local politics) and back again into processes across and outside of urban governance. Ward contrasts two different urban politics, both of which, as in the chapters by Hankins and Martin, and Wyly and Newman, see the urban as a setting for questions of urban service provision, and economic development. In Ward's chapter, however, the purview of formal urban government defines the setting of politics, as well as the issues, even when they invoke broader processes like capital investment and economic restructuring. Indeed, even as Ward introduces the idea of splintered urban politics – picked-up policy fragments from cities near and far, reworked through a range of networks – the urban remains primarily about the invocation of power by local government, albeit through multi-scalar relations of individual policy-makers.

Combining Ward's viewpoint with those of Donald McNeill and John Carr, we see an emphasis on actors such as elected and appointed officials and their interactions with, or on behalf of, urban citizens. Through the lens of formal governance, two processes are evident. First, local governments comprise influences near and far, shaped not just by local dynamics, personalities, and power structures, but by the ways that such personalities derive ideas, and support from a geographically disparate range of networks. Second, where policy frameworks explicitly incorporate local and grassroots input in the formal setting of local government, these bottom-up insights always highlight formal decision-making structures; according to Carr, they 'occlude' the conflicts inherent in participation in favour of consensus. Carr's discussion of participatory planning in Seattle investigates the ways that elites obscure their own policy decisions through delegation of consensus-building and seeming policy-management to staff and citizen-input processes. Donald McNeill examines mayors-as-policy-makers as an embodiment of the urban as a site of business, an economic power, and a setting for identity. As a framework for viewing the roles and actions of local government, then, Ward, McNeill, and Carr point to urban politics as an arena for certain kinds of power relations which enact and build upon political personalities, cross-local information sharing, and policy networks to produce an urban medium which is as much constitutive of what can be political as it is a means for politics. Our second theme thus highlights that urban politics proceed through that which they enact; municipal policies and actors use the medium of government to reinforce the fact of municipal government.

Adding Kurt Iveson's chapter to our understanding of urban politics as both setting and medium broadens our lens from formal governance to informal social relations and regulations as means for enforcing norms of behaviour and forms of contestation,

even in realms seemingly far removed from city hall. Although quite different empirical realms, Iveson's study of graffiti 'policing' shares with Carr's examination of participatory planning an interest in the broad range of social controls that apply to politics. Iveson and Carr both consider urban politics as a medium for who naturalizes and decides what voices we hear in political debate and even in 'underground' discourses like graffiti. Iveson's chapter emphasizes that multiple actors – not just those in the formal arena of government – seek to silence, to give voice to some and not others. Drawing these two parts of 'setting' and 'medium' together in the book include the chapters by Iveson, and Hankins and Martin, who all draw explicitly upon political theorist Jacques Rancière (1999) in order to examine the formal and informal means of defining and delimiting acceptable interactions and recognizable actors for urban politics.

The attention through Rancière to the marginal, or unheard and unseen, of politics connects to the third section of the book, urban politics as community, and the ways communities are defined and made visible or legitimate in the public sphere. These chapters together articulate a third theme of urban politics as simultaneously making evident, and obscuring, difference and its political significance. The different approaches in the five chapters in the community section offer evoke long-standing notions of urban politics as about, alternatively, competing interest groups, or difference and community identity (Dahl 1961; Young 1990). They consider the contestations of inter-group conflicts, or identities, and highlight the ways that certain voices, actions, or ecologies remain unseen in formal urban politics. Natalie Oswin's chapter, for example, point to the processes that render as invisible certain ways of being in the city. Her use of queer theory exposes the ways that urban politics of identity, family, and labour draw upon and make visible and normal only certain

behaviours and bodies. In order to 'see' these processes of queering as urban politics, it is necessary to connect, as Oswin does, the policy dots of global labour flows, 'creative' economies, and cultural politics, be they be a city-state like Singapore, nation-states, or city governments. Like the chapters by Davidson, McNeill, and Carr, Oswin turns our attention to the use and configuration of institutions of power in urban politics, and the ways that institutional power relates to everyday citizens and urban identities, including by simplifying and hiding differences such as class or family form.

The chapter by Jamie Winders points to how assumptions that we make about urban politics – such as how communities are constituted – shape what is seen and accepted as political participation. Her case study of Latinos in Nashville illustrates exactly what might be lost when one perspective of urban politics – that which recognizes residents based on neighbourhood affiliation – is prioritized over other possible perspectives, such as cultural or social identifications. Much like John Carr's chapter, her case illustrates how government efforts at inclusion and recognition shape a viewpoint that only sees certain dimensions, residents, and territories, precluding alternative viewpoints or politics. By seeking to see the communities unrecognized in Nashville's politics, Winders is able to point to the parts unseen, the alternative residents, territories, and viewpoints. The chapters in this book help us to push beyond city hall or formal interactions in part by looking at institutional frameworks and community definitions. A broad range of scholarship in urban politics highlights the dilemmas and ideals around citizen-state engagements in urban politics (see Box 13.1).

Insert Box 13.1 – about here

Susan Hanson's chapter takes a different approach to political community, seeing volunteering, entrepreneurship, and community-building as sites of urban politics. By shifting her viewpoint on politics, Hanson allows us to interrogate the changes that can occur though business relationships. Indeed, both Hanson and Carr's chapters focus on how everyday politics are conditioned through certain activities and processes – the need and desire to be entrepreneurial and the political engagements that exercises like participatory planning involve. Carr's chapter interrogates the channelling that state structures entail – the activities and inputs that are considered relevant and the ways that regulation or law shape it. As with Iveson's chapter, there is a social element and disciplining to the urban politics that result, be they formal or informal. In contrast to Iveson's focus on police, and Carr's on planning, Hanson's chapter actually reworks – and challenges Rancièrian viewpoint on – the meaning of politics. She sees the entrepreneurs of her case study as active participants in community politics despite – or perhaps because of – their removal from the formal or 'police' state and their ability to shift relationships, not to bring voices into the public policy realm.

Hanson's argument forces us to reconsider how we view entrepreneurs. She challenges a notion of politics as primarily exerting power, and reconfigures 'business' actions as empowering beyond traditional economic activity. Perhaps more than any other set of chapters, Hanson's paired with Mark Davidson's discussion offer the parallax view: In Hanson's, capitalists – albeit small scale, self-exploiting – create an urban politics of community that is, in many ways, post-industrial, seeming to transcend an urban politics of class. Davidson's chapter challenges the post-industrial interpretation, and positions class as still central to and embedded within urban politics. Taken together, the chapters are parallax; see one viewpoint, then the

other, but conceptually both together are difficult to hold. Juxtaposing them as we have challenges a singularity of urban politics, and forces questions about what we seek to see in our urban analyses. Matt Huber's chapter highlights how viewpoints about what is urban or political become entrenched over time and are hard to challenge.

In this book we have therefore sought to disrupt the notion of urban politics with multiplicity. But we are not advocating an 'anything goes' perspective; rather, the pressing issue is of what position one takes to consider urban politics, and what possible questions such a position demands and allows. We suggest here three guiding principles or themes: that the urban is always constitutive of near and far, multi-scalar and socio-ecological processes; that urban politics contain and frame possible modes of engagement, necessitating constant questioning of the very structures of engagement and debate; and finally, that urban politics consciously deploys and obscures identity, difference, contestation – rendering some conflict visible and others not. In order to grapple with these multiplicities, we advocate a perspective that consciously seeks to destabilize, to see the side as yet unseen.

What this perspective leaves us with is a commitment to destabilize and deconstruct. But yet, and perhaps more importantly, it also means that at times we must make difficult theoretical and political decisions. When pressed into action or necessitated by events, we must act as political agents and in such situations we need to take positions. This means that some urban political problems might require a fix that, at least for some period, adopts a certain viewpoint that bars others. You cannot, for example, hold all of the authors' viewpoints in this book at the same time. So when it comes to urban political problems such as, for example, fiscal crisis or hate

crimes, which perspective must you adopt? And in adopting this perspective which ones can you not hold? This is the difficult politics of taking sides, but as we have hopefully demonstrated in this book, the process of taking sides does not and should not mean a forgetting and/or erasure of other perspectives. The parallax perspective requires a constant consideration of the gaps between perspectives and the implications of holding a perspective that creates a gap between you and those who hold other viewpoints.

References

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