Chapter 1

Introduction: Thinking Critically about Urban Politics

It is now trite to call into question what we mean by "urban" or "politics". The urban politics literature is full of numerous attempts to develop more cohesive and/or distinctive takes on the conjunction. This, of course, is a useful exercise that mediates those countless passing deployments of the term. Indeed this mediation is a crucial political task itself. As the chapters in this collection demonstrate, there are important stakes involved how we understand urban politics. For example, if we understand urban politics as something that happens *within cities* and across all *contestations* then we will arrive at different conclusions with regards to things such as the vibrancy of political life and democratic process.

The task of defining "urban politics" is not only analytic, but deeply political. When we set out a definition of urban politics we identify our object of analysis. Critical theorist Slavoj Zizek (2006) refers to this as an act of bracketing: "*the bracketing itself produces it objects*" (56; emphasis in original). Urban politics do not simply appear to us when we decide to investigate them. Rather we have to actively construct them. We do this by abstracting from the indeterminate set of processes that constitute the city and urban life. Without accepting this task we would be faced with a vast collection of phenomena that would certainly leave us paralysed, unable to start the process of making sense.

So bracketing is a necessary task in order to gain knowledge. But as Zizek (2006) explains this task is not one that can claim to be neutral: "This bracketing is not only epistemological, it concerns what Marx called "real abstraction" (56). What this means it that when we define our object of study, we have the concomitant task of deciding what to include and what to leave out. If we focus on City Hall as the venue for urban politics, we might be leaving out important parts of any city's political fabric. Or if we concentrate explicitly on the economic drivers of urban politics, we might omit other types of social struggles. The conundrum here is the fact we must necessarily bracket. We cannot wish to capture the complete complexities of any social arrangement. So what to do?

One response might be to say that all perspectives on urban politics – or anything else for that matter – are equally valid. Or one might say that contrary perspectives must be brought into agreement; perhaps using something akin to Hegel's dialectical method. Or, as Zizek's (2006) theory of parallax view suggests, we might sometimes accept the incongruity of two perceptions and attempt to keep both in mind at the same time. Zizek equates this to the famous optical trick of 'two faces or a vase' where you either see two faces or a vase but never both. You know both exist, but nevertheless you must chose to view only one. This is how Zizek (2006) describes the parallax in philosophical terms: "... subject and object are inherently "mediated," so that an "epistemological" shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an "ontological" shift in the object itself" (17). What this means is that different perspectives – what Zizek calls "bracketing" – on urban politics are

related, even if they remain incompatible. "Urban politics" (the object) appears as it does because we (the subject) theorize in certain ways.

There are many consequences to this philosophical position. Here we want to develop just one, that of the necessity to see the implications of a shift in perspective. The notion of parallax perspectives calls for us to think about what happens in that non-space between on viewpoint and another. For example we might decide to approach urban politics via its official state institutions; there are good reasons to that can illuminate a great deal of social struggle and order. Alternatively we might examine urban politics through the idea that everyone in the city is a political actor and, consequently, urban politics is about the entirety of social relations running through the metropolis. Again there might be very good reasons for doing this. The point however is that we must think about what this shift in perspective means: What changes? What gets lost when we rethink the object? What types of politics and social changes can be justified from certain viewpoints? The various approaches to urban politics in this book open some political possibilities and close others. So which possibilities should remain open and what others can, perhaps, become closed? The way we theorize the city itself has a lot to do with answering these questions.

Urban Politics and the Geographies of the City

In the past decade there has been a significant rethinking of the geography of the city, and, by extension, urban politics. At risk of oversimplification, this rethinking has involved a shift from reading the city as a discrete space with its own internal politics to a more relational view of urbanism. A good example of the former is provided by John (2009, 17): "At its most straightforward, urban politics is about authoritative decision-making at a smaller scale than national units… the focus of interest is at the sub-national level with particular reference to the political actors and institutions operating there". Within this framing, urban politics are contained within cities. These internal politics can then be related to smaller (i.e. neighbourhood) and larger (i.e. national) scales. The nature of this containment has been conceptualized differently. Some have suggested the collective consumption issues (i.e. schooling, transit) necessarily generate localized political communities (Castells, 1977; Saunders, 1981). Others, particularly those interested in urban history, have pointed towards the political consciousness that arose when people started living within cities (Nash, 1979).

Within the urban politics literature, jurisdictional boundaries of cities and municipalities have often served as a foundation for those who theorise the urban as a bounded space (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Taylor, 2004). This perspective has often motivated studies that look for the particular combination of factors within an urban environment – usually political factors – that help explain the variables under consideration (Oliver, 2000). Those interested in multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks, 2003) have also adopted this approach to conceptualize the city as one part of a set of nested scales (i.e. neighborhood, city, region, nation, global); the focus of analysis being the identification of the particular nature of governance and development within the city and how this

relates to other scales. This tradition of urban studies continues, particularly in the context of what many see as a reworking of scale relations (Brenner, 2001; Swyngedouw, 1997).

A bounded city perspectives has become increasingly problematized. With the growing recognition that socio-spatial relations have transformed as a consequence of globalization processes, it is generally acknowledged that the notions of bounded-ness and containment have become problematic (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000; something also captured to a limited extent by Lefebvre's (1991) emphasis on cities as a process of urbanization). In the context of entrepreneurial governance, mobile capital and communication technologies, the urban system is view to have transformed significantly over the past 40 years (Harvey, 1989). A major consequence is that proximity and nation-state relations are now less relevant to urban governance (Swyngedouw, 1997). This means that if we are to understand the processes occurring within particular city spaces, we need to be cognizant of the varied set of relations they maintain as opposed to taking for granted that, for example, neighbouring municipalities and national governments will be the most significant.

The second and related reason for this move has been a more general critique of scalar perspectives. For Marston et al. (2005), a move away from scalar perspectives should be total, preferring instead to understand relations as networked; or to use Leitner's (2004) theorization, to move from a concern from vertical relations to horizontal relations. No longer, it is argued, can we therefore see the world in a three-scale structure (see Taylor, 1992): micro (urban), meso (nation) and macro (global). Whilst the view that scale is now redundant as a theoretical tool is not held here, the emphasis on horizontal geographies (networks; non-distanced relations; flows) is recognized as important to understanding the constitution of the city. We therefore require an understanding of the city that avoids the search for some essential spatiality; rather we need an approach that captures the multiplicity of socio-spatialities and engages in a dialogue about the relative epistemologies developed in different perspectives on the urban (Massey, 2007).

As part of a wider attempt to rethink the geographies of the city, many now stress the relational nature of urbanism. Within the context of globalization processes, the idea of a discretely bounded and/or scalar political community has been either abandoned or supplemented by reading cities as inter-connected and inter-constituted.

Some have rejected the idea of the bounded urban political community because they view it as politically regressive. A notable example of this came from David Harvey (1987) when he wrote against the "militant particularism" that he saw characterising localized political movements. He argued "[T]he potentiality for militant particularism embedded in place runs the risk of sliding back into a parochialist politics" (324). Harvey's rejection comes from seeing the now globally-coordinated production and consumption of commodities creating geographically complex social relations. The idea that a localized, place-based political movement might transcend its own particular interests and politicize these relations just seems impossible for Harvey.

Others have taken a different position. Doreen Massey (1991; 2005) has written extensively on the politics of place in an era of economic globalization. In her work she has rejected the dualistic

framing of the local and global that Harvey (1987) uses: "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, 2005; 184). Fitting the world into the categories of local and global are rejected because the division obfuscates their mutual constitution. This argument has led many of look towards those connections and relations that local places constitute between themselves (e.g. Featherstone, 2008).

One response to this approach might be: What about the government? Whilst different places might have become more connected in recent times, city governments still exist! Many adopting the relational view of urban politics have attempted to respond to this type of question. For some this has involved a rethinking of state relations and the role that city government play in these (e.g. Brenner, 2004). Others have attempted to conceptualize the changing form and operation of state power. John Allen (2004) has argued that state power does not operate within scales. He rejects that idea that a city's political authority is wielded purely within certain jurisdictional boundaries. Instead Allen chooses to understand state power as a topological arrangement: "as a *relational effect* of social interaction where there are no pre-defined distances of simple proximities to speak of" (2004; 19; *emphasis in original*). The location of politics therefore to be found across the multiplicity of networked relations that (re)make the city: "the mediated relationships of power multiply the possibilities for political intervention at different moments and within a number of institutional settings" (ibid. 29).

A topological account of the city therefore transcends the local/global by viewing state power as "multiple, overlapping, tangled, interpenetrating, as well as relational" (Allen and Cochrane, 2010, 1087). An important consequence of taking this viewpoint is that we often have to look for state power in places that we would not associated with "government". Given a city can have various forms of networked relations it may exercise its power in a potentially endless list of places. If we then think about urban politics in terms of contestation and struggle, our venues for such activities might need to be sort out. We might have to reject the idea that political power within cities resides in city hall and, instead, look towards those points in time and space where state power is wielded.

Recently these relational approaches have been used to rethink urban policies. Here the idea that cities have their own policy-making procedures and resultant policies has been challenged. So the idea that a city like London or New York generates its own approaches is complicated by the fact that this constitution of a city's policies occurs as a dialogue. Under this policy mobilities framing, the geography of policies is transformed: "it moves beyond the limits of the traditional political science-dominated policy transfer literature, acknowledging its insights while also arguing for a broadening of your understanding of agents of transference, a reconceiving of the sociospatial elements of how policies are made mobile, and a departure from methodological nationalism" (Ward and McCann, 2011, 168). Along with viewing urban politics are constructed through sets of extra-local relations, so too we might look at urban policies as emerging across and through cities in very particular ways. This might be the advent of a business development scheme in Chicago that makes it way to Manchester, UK or the organic origination of a policy choice in California that gets

packaged up and codified to be installed in Pennsylvania. Whatever the case, we are again made cognisant of the fact that our theorization of the city will itself shape what it is we are studying.

A challenge facing the urban politics literature is therefore to decide whether its theorizations of the city are compatible. Could the relational view of cities (and policy-making) be made compatible with the idea that the city is a contained space with its own politics and policy-making? Could we transcend the current distinction with another perspective? Or do we need to view each perspective as incompatible and, consequently, consider the movement between the two a parallax shift? If so we would need to ask what gets lost and what is found when we see the city in either frame.

The Politics of Naming 'Politics'

But what of politics? Do we face the same types of questions with regards to the *politics* in urban politics? To some degree we do. There are clearly different conceptualizations of politics available. Politics can be associated with government and institutions (REF). They can be examined in terms of the multitude of governance procedures that produce order (Foucault, REF). Politics can be viewed as always present in all of our actions (REF). Or politics can be made something quite specific (Rancière, 1999). Within this collection you will find various derivations of these approaches.

There are some now common distinctions within the urban politics literature with respect to how politics are theorized. As Davies and Imbroscio (2009, 3) recently commented, politics are often divided into questions of government/institutions and governance. The former is quite obvious. It sees politics as occurring within and/or around those institutions that are given the power to govern. So you might be concerned with the election of city councils, the reform of institutional structures or the geography of voting patterns. Questions of governance tend to revolve around a more diverse array of concerns. Anne Mette Kjaer (2009) makes describes the recent relationship between these two approaches:

> "Over the last two decades the term 'governance was applied to denote a change in public administration from a set-up focusing on hierarchy and clear demarcation lines between politics and administration, and between the state and society, to an organisational set-up emphasising networks and the overlapping roles of politicians and administrators as well as of state and society actors" (137)

The spilling over of institutional regimes into society generally signals to the debt which many writings on urban politics owe Michel Foucault's (1982) theory of governmentality. For Foucault the modern state and the modern autonomous individual had become intertwined in their making. The state operated in and through the individual in such a way that the dividing line between them could be not drawn without severely limiting our understanding of the scope of politics. In this sense urban politics can be viewed as coursing through the urban citizen, it present in multiple forms through the conduct and positionality of that individual.

We find a great deal of utility in this reading of urban politics. The false distinctions between state and society when thinking urban politics can serve to de-politicize and mystify important social injustices. However, does this mean that politics saturates all of urban life? When Foucault (1995) develops his reading of the panoptican prison, he argues that the design's key effect is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). As the panoptican has been developed as a metaphorical device across the social sciences, the idea that power functions through omnipresent state/society mechanisms has become influential. Indeed we can see its influence on the relational understandings of state and power discussed above (Allen, 2004).

But is the notion that governmentality, and by extension politics, is infused into most aspects of contemporary urban life a productive perspective? Well this depends on what we want to designate as politics. For help in answering this question, many contributors in this collection turn to the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999; 2004; 2007). For Rancière the concept of "politics" needs to be separated from that of "policing". Policing is theorized as something akin to Foucault's governmentality. It is that hegemonic set of social arrangements that serve to assign and maintain roles. It is a social law that 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). Rancière uses the phrase "distribution of the sensible" to capture the regulatory function of policing. The "distribution" therefore presents "the system of self-evident facts" (2004, 12) that has institutions perform their (expected) role, citizens behave in certain kinds of ways and the authorities act as adjudicator and repressor. Given cities are full of contestations and struggles over distributions, responsibilities and tasks this is a provocative thesis since these become processes of policing.

Rancière (1999) theorizes politics as that which policing is not. Politics is the very transformation of the police order, generated by a disagreement that "shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination" (ibid. 30). This gives us a theory of politics explains it as occurring rarely. Politics are not traced upon the topographies of power and/or state. Rather politics occurs when one group of people reject their roles within the policed social order and, in doing so, they necessary reallocate roles conditioning a new police order.

Politics become democratic when such changes are premised on equality. Put differently, democracy can only legitimate itself via equality. Political claims are therefore concerned with a party in society recognising themselves as an unequal participant: "...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" (1999, 123). Democratic politics are therefore disruptive:

> "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 worlds in a single world" (37)

An implication of this theory of democratic politics is that we cannot equate politics with either state institutions or everyday contestations:

> "Democracy is not the parliamentary system or the legitimate State. It is not a state of the social either, the reign of individualism or of the masses... Democracy is more precisely the name of a singular disruption of this order of bodies as a community" (99)

Democratic societies are therefore those that allow the potential for politics; the potential for the signification and resolution of inequality. A society that presumes that all are equally included is a post-democracy society. If we relate this theory of politics to urban politics, we find not the politics streams through the city. But rather than we find that politics hinge of the production of dissensus (i.e. a rejection of roles) and transformation of social orders. Politics is therefore a particular type of struggle and contestation.

These various understandings of politics again leave us with the need to consider their (in)compatibility. Throughout the collection you will find various interpretations of politics. Some authors make these explicit, other theories are implicit. We find the contrast between the "politics are everywhere" and Rancière's politics are irregular are productive entry point for considering the politics in urban *politics*. Rancière elevates politics to a particular place within democratic societies. Politics emerges as a society commitment to correct a wrong (i.e. an inequality within a community of equals). To label all contestations as political is therefore to lose focus of this necessity in democratic societies. Of course Rancière recognises that there are many forms of struggle and contestation that are crucial within cities. But they might not all be political.

Here then we get a glimpse of Zizek's parallax shift. The ideas that "politics are everywhere" and politics are irregular moments of dissensus are incompatible. Hence the fact Rancière goes to great lengths to distinguish the two. So we can ask what the shift between perspectives means. For those who adopt the "politics are everywhere" frame, we might see a multitude of worthy contestations across the city that might collectively amount of significant societal change, or individually create change in valuable ways. For those using the Rancière framing many of these contestations might be considered as events within the police order. The term politics is therefore reserved for a particular type of contestation and social change – a disruption in the police and its replacement – that maintains the prospective of a specific wrong (i.e. an unequal participant) changing society. By not subsuming politics within policing, the question of whether certain contestations deserve to become political (i.e. is it about an inequality) remains.

Structure of the Collection

In light of the thinking on the urban and politics above, this collection offers a selection of approaches to identify and understand urban politics. It has not been our intention to provide a text from a particular viewpoint or disciplinary perspective. Rather our attempt is to capture urban politics in its numerous dimensions. This is not to say we are disinterested in a conversation about

the correct way to think the urban or politics. Indeed part of our desire to produce a text that shows urban politics in its diversity is motivated by the want for a conversation about the most just and productive ways to think urban politics. As the reader moves through the chapters and encounters different *critical* approaches, you might ask yourself what seems the most compelling in certain contributions. Do those authors who maintain a bounded conceptualization of the city better capture important social struggles? Or do those that have a very specific idea of politics provide a more insightful way to get at some of the social problems and their related solutions?

The chapters are organized into three different sections. Each section is thematically organized according to a different way in which one can think about the city being a political space: (a) setting, (b) medium and (c) communities. We will explain these thematics at the start of each section of the book. But at this point it should be stressed that these conceptualizations are not seen as distinct and discrete. Rather, they represent different theoretical perspectives (Zizek, 2006) that are able to capture the different socio-spatial dimensions of the urban.

In some cases, such as "setting" there are clearly scalar and networked geographies that are intricately connected to the constitution of the physicality of the city. For example, the city can be a setting for municipal politics (e.g. collective provisioning of services) and a setting for capital investment (e.g. spatially targeted investment and lending). The city is therefore a setting for the enactment of various practices, whether they are scalar, such as neighbourhood (i.e. neighbourhood watch group) or metropolitan based (e.g. city government), or networked (e.g. geographies of mortgage lending). Here, the city is simply designated as a space for some practice to proceed. The city as medium recognizes that the urban is seen as a domain in which politics is identified and designated as occurring through (Foucault, 1995). This conceptualization is drawn from work in geography that has recognized how urban development reforms such as electronic surveillance (Graham, 1998) and public space design (Howell, 1993) have been motivated by particular transformations in social and political thought. Finally, the city is seen as a place of community, both in terms of a place where communities are constituted and where the politics of community are recognized and played out.