

Introduction

Mark Davidson and Deborah Martin

Setting [set-ting] ~ the surroundings or environment of anything

The chapters in this section all speak to the idea of the city as a setting for urban politics. That is to say, the city is thought of here as somewhere that politics occurs. We can, of course, say that this is a truism of urban politics, that a city is *where* we find urban politics. Our point within this section is to explore the ways in which places appear within urban politics: how the city, or particular sites within cities, function as settings for politics. We offer three takes on this question. First, we look at the idea that urban politics take place within neighbourhoods, imagining the city as a conglomeration of different placed-based communities that collectively constitute the city. Second, we look at the city through the lens of it being a metropolitan political community. Here we are on familiar terrain for those traditionally interested in urban politics. Finally, we look at the idea that the city is a setting within a network of relations. These all represent different entry points from which to look at the city, but as you will see they are far from incompatible viewpoints.

So why concentrate on the idea of setting? The word setting refers to the environment of something. For example, you might say that a garden is a wonderful setting for a party, or that a certain public square is a great setting for a protest. In terms of urban politics, we might therefore say that the urban environment is a great setting for particular forms of politics; that, for example, the city is suited to political

organization and action based on spatialized set of concerns (e.g. neighbourhood amenities and/or environmental qualities). Or we might say that certain types of concerns, such as transportation or housing, are best dealt with at the city level. Viewing cities as settings for urban politics anticipates certain issues as urban politics, but dismisses others as unsuitable for such a setting.

This reading of urban politics aligns with comments like the following from Manuel Castells:

Cities in our societies are the expressions of the different dimensions of life, of the variety of social processes that form the intricate web of our experience. Therefore people tend to consider cities, space, and urban functions and forms as the mainspring for their feelings. This is the basis for the urban ideology that assigns the causality of social effects to the structure of spatial forms. (1983: 326)

What Castells describes here is the idea that cities themselves produce a certain politics, through both their function and related organizational needs *and* the ideological and visceral environment. We therefore get a sense of urban politics as distinctive from other kinds of politics.¹ The neighbourhood and city environment might then have their specific concerns and features that distinguish them. A task for scholars might then be to try and understand this uniqueness and compare it to other forms of politics.

This viewpoint, that cities produce a certain type of life experience and consequently generates a particular form of politics, relates back to some of the very

¹ For an appraisal of the contemporary relevance of Manuel Castells' theories of urban politics see Ward and McCann (2006); further discussions are contained within the same issue.

earliest attempts to understand the industrial city. In the writings of the early urban sociologists, we see descriptions of this life experience. For example, in his 1887 description of the impersonal competitive environment of the industrial city – what he called *Gesellschaft* – Ferdinand Tönnies explains urban society as ‘essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors’ (74). He goes on to draw an equivalency between human relations and commodities by explaining how, in the industrial city, the former are regulated by laws not interpersonal commitments:

Gesellschaft, an aggregate by convention and law of nature, is to be understood as a multitude of natural and artificial individuals, the wills and spheres of whom are in many relations with and to one another, and remain nevertheless independent of one another and devoid of mutual familiar relationships. This gives us the general description of ‘bourgeois society’ ... (87)

From this description, as well as the works of other early sociologists like Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, we find not only the idea that cities produce particular political concerns, but also that they produce particular types of people and societies. For many urban theorists attempting to make sense of the industrial city in its infancy, it was a concern for the fragmented, anonymous and individualistic nature of this society that troubled them.

[Insert Box S1 – about here](#)

Yet it must be noted that troubling concerns were paired with an acknowledgement of the city’s emancipatory potential. In his famous 1903 essay ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, Georg Simmel describes the freedoms brought about by the anonymity of commodity-based urban societies. Transcending the ties of familial and tribal bonds brought with it the potential for the urban dweller to construct new identities

and bypass social strictures. We might say the same about the political concerns that Castells claims are generated by the city. The advent of urban infrastructures, such as sewers, roads, railways and so on, may well have brought with them political conflicts. But at the same time they generated, as least for some, liberation from disease and distance. As you read through the pages of this section, it might well be worth keeping the two sides of the coin in mind. The social conflicts and struggles generated in the city certainly have many problematic elements. But might these conflicts and struggles be generative of new opportunities and modes of life? And how might we gauge if these new opportunities are indeed generated?

This first chapter in this section written by Katherine Hankins and Deborah Martin approaches the question of city as setting by looking at the neighbourhood as a space for politics. They argue that the neighbourhood has long been understood as a powerful generator of political movements. But the idea that the neighbourhood is a contained space is rejected in favour of a relational understanding of the neighbourhood. Here neighbourhood-based politics are viewed as emanating from ‘flexible and necessarily multi-scalar’ sets of processes. As a result, Hankins and Martin reject the idea that neighbourhoods have self-contained politics. Rather, they prefer to see neighbourhood politics as a bundle of processes that become manifest in place. In order to develop this understanding of the neighbourhood setting, they draw upon a study of a faith-based, neighbourhood-based social movement: ‘strategic neighbouring’. Through their description of this missionary-type urban endeavour, Hankins and Martin show both the networked and located features of neighbourhood politics. But drawing on Rancière’s understanding of politics, they claim that strategic neighbouring never achieves a true politics. Here they point towards the inability of the strategic neighbouring movement to see beyond the politics of the neighbourhood,

or city for that matter. Thus, whilst Hankins and Martin acknowledge the importance of neighbourhood setting for the development of some urban politics, they argue that politics that remain fixed at the neighbourhood scale may be constrained in ambitions and goals.

In the following chapter Kevin Ward looks out of his window to examine the city as a political entity. This begins by reviewing the major theories that have explained 'urban politics' over recent decades. The theory that Ward describes as 'old' is that associated with Manuel Castells' idea that urban politics are those related to particular urban issues around collective consumption. This is contrasted to 'new urban politics' (Cox, 1993). Rather than being concerned with collective provisions (e.g. roads, schools, trash collecting) this urban politics is based squarely upon economic development. In a world of economic competition cities have transformed the ways they are governed in order that they achieve requisite economic growth. But, as Ward explains, this is not to say we can consider the city as discrete entity that competes with other cities. Rather we might need to see the city as 'splintered' in that different policies and strategies shift from city to city. Using the example of Calgary, Ward narrates how tentacles of American think-tanks stretched into and shaped the city's planning process. The chapter leaves us with the need to think 'urban politics' in both scalar and relational senses. Scalar in the sense that the city legislates for itself with boundaries (i.e. Calgary city limits) and relation since this legislation emerges from a whole network of connections to policy making around the globe. But do we have an adequate theory of urban politics to capture both these geographical understandings of the city?

The final chapter in this section by Elvin Wyly and Kathe Newman explores the idea of urban politics as networked through a rich empirical account of mortgage foreclosures in the US. Since 2007 waves of housing foreclosures have swept across the US, causing a financial house of cards to collapse across the globe. As Wyly and Newman explain, these foreclosures have had a distinctly localized geography, being clustered in certain types of often poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. We might then view the foreclosure phenomena as a localized one with global implications. But what Wyly and Newman demonstrate is that foreclosures have to be viewed as always having been bound up with national and international financial networks. Predatory lenders had been targeting particular neighbourhoods in order that the goals of national and global financial actors were served. Here, then, the city is a setting for urban politics in the sense that localized processes are now always bound up in a global political economy, the story of the foreclosure crisis being not one of poor people borrowing irresponsibility and rogue lenders, but rather a massively significant co-constitution of capital and community.

Through the different entry points of ‘neighbourhood’, ‘city’ and ‘network’ the chapters in this section therefore challenge us to think carefully about the geographical lenses we use to understand ‘urban politics’. What is shared across the three chapters is an attempt in each case to incorporate different geographical lenses: neighbourhood + national organization, city + global policy networks and local community + global capital accumulation. Whilst all maintain the idea of the city as a setting of urban politics – the city as an environment where particular politics play out – they also place this ‘container’ of urban politics within a relational setting. The consequences for political thought and action are multiple. For Hankins and Martin it means we must understand what goes on within a neighbourhood as a consequence of

the multiple of intersecting relations that constitute it. Consequently, they urge us to think about what constitutes political action in any neighbourhood. For Ward it means that the politics of right-wing think-tanks must be implicated in debates over how to grow a city. And for Wyly and Newman it means we cannot understand the geography of mortgage foreclosures without understanding how it is that they are bound up with a capitalist class's attempt to accumulate wealth through the dispossession of others. None of the chapters in this section therefore rely solely on a scalar bracketing of urban politics. Rather they choose to frame urban politics as a particular setting from which to then understand how this setting (i.e. neighbourhood, city, housing market) gets constituted.

Questions to further explore

- If all spaces are relational, do we need to bracket particular 'settings' for (urban) politics?
- How important are neighbourhood and/or city associations to you?
- What are the political consequences of seeing places like neighbourhoods and cities are relationally constituted? Who is a member of a particular city or neighbourhood?
- Do we still have a particular brand of politics associated with cities or are all politics urban?
- How do different settings – neighbourhoods, cities, network nodes – operate together?

Note

[move footnote here]

References

Castells, Manuel (1983) *The City and the Grass Roots: a Cross-cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.

Cox, K. (1993) 'The local and the global in the new urban politics: a critical view', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 11(4): 433–448.

Simmel, G. (1995) [1903] 'The metropolis and mental life', in Kasinitz, P. (ed.) *Metropolis: Center and Symbol for Our Times*. New York University Press: New York. pp. 30–45.

Tonnies, Ferninand (1955) [1887] *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. Dover Publications: London.

Ward, K. and McCann, E. (2006) "'The new path to a new city'": Introduction to a debate on urban politics, social movements and the legacies of Manuel Castells' *The City and the Grassroots*', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 30(1), 189–193.