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## **What is (still) political about the city?**

Our initial piece was motivated by a concern to reflect not just on the contribution of Swyngedouw's post-political city thesis, but our own intellectual journey with it. At first, it seemed to us to help with a conundrum of contemporary politics – a situation of deep depoliticisation and sporadic, sometimes violent, politicisation. However, the more we thought about the treatment of the political and the city, the more problematic the post-political city lens became. This appeared to be a journey other researchers were travelling and a critical reappraisal is apparent (e.g. Darling, 2016; Nicholls and Uitermarks, 2016; Davidson and Iveson, 2015). By collating criticisms in a freely written and accessible critique, our purpose was to generate detailed discussion on the idea of the post-political city. Hence, our surprise that the responses did not engage with our piece as such.

We have to wonder why the focus fell more on Rancière (and his concept of the political) and not Swyngedouw's translation of his work into the field of urban studies (what we called his post-political city thesis). To us this is the real "missed opportunity" (see Derickson above) of this symposium. Our piece never argued, as Swyngedouw suggests, that the post-political city is only about depoliticisation; nor can we fathom why Dikec - in the series of conclusions to which he jumps -

feels he can cast aspersions on our political and scholarly interest in (in)equality (Dikec XX above).

To varying degrees, all three responses state that we fail to really understand Rancière and the wider literature. If so, then, judging by the scholars we cite in relation to the use of the police/politics in urban studies, we are in very good company. Our brief mention of Hannah Arendt provokes a similar ticking-off from Swyngedouw and particularly Dikec. However, even within the post-foundational school there are different understandings of the political and how we should study politics (Marchart, 2007). We mention Arendt precisely because she is, indeed, a post-foundational thinker, but one whose work opens up other ways to comprehend and examine politics and the political. Besides her associative (and not dissociative) understanding of the political (Marchart, 2007), Arendt perceives established and institutionalized spaces not as part of the police order but as central for politics to appear (cf. Arendt, 1958; 1990; similar arguments about Arendt's work have been made by various political theorists such as Schaap, 2011; Berkowitz, 2014; Buckler, 2011; and Balibar (2007)).

Ultimately, we think that work on the post-political city avoids or is inconsistent about the urban, while being very prescriptive about politics. This is problematic because the post-political city has become something of a label for the lack of politics in and about the city. A clearer understanding of the urban is necessary

because it provides a way in which we can continue to relate the city to politics. The remainder of this short reply clarifies and reasserts key components of our critique. The prime concern was and still is epistemological: when we look at the city through the post-political lens, what happens to urban politics and, specifically, what goes missing?

### **The police/politics opposition**

The commentators lamented that we presented a caricature of Rancière's distinction between politics and the police order. We still disagree. This binary lies at the core of how many scholars have translated Rancière into urban political research. This is not to say, however, that this "police/politics opposition" in Rancière's words (2010, 206) is uncontested (Prentoulis and Thomasson, 2013, 181; Marchart, 2011, 131-132; Chambers, 2011, 318; Davidson and Iveson, 2015) or that urban scholars have unreflectively "applied" it in urban studies. However, a clear tendency has been apparent, and not just in urban studies, hence perhaps why even Rancière partly repeals this distinction (unequivocally outlined in Rancière 2014, 41-42 and 2010, 36-37) when responding to critics (2010, 206-207.) Therefore, though the distinction between police and politics is more nuanced in Rancière's œuvre, we insist that a binary understanding permeates and frames much of the literature referring to the post-political city. For example, Deas (2012, 2287) states, in his interpretation of Swyngedouw, that the post-political city is one in which "urban politics is devoid of the political: where

governance is cleansed of the contaminating influence of dispute and dissensus". In a key piece, McLeod (2011, 2648) writes that "[f]or Swyngedouw (...) grand designs for equality and spaces of dissonance are placated in large part by the construction of what Ranciere referred to as a 'policed order'" (ibid). There is not a strong sense of contingency, of the incompleteness of the urban police order in such work. To state this, as we clearly mention in our initial piece, is not novel, but drawing on existing criticism in the field of urban studies. "Rancière [...] indicates he is interested in the interface of politics and the police. However, the work he has done and inspired often aims precisely at identifying the pristinely political" (Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016, 4; cf. Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014, 973; Crane, 2015, 207).

Further, as is clear above, for many urban researchers their interlocutor is Swyngedouw rather than Rancière, and the sense of an all-encompassing post-political condition centred on the police order of managerial governance arrangements is to be found in Swyngedouw's own work. This, as we also point out above, may well be interpreted as diminishing the possibilities and contingencies of contemporary urban politics:

"Consensual policymaking, in which the stakeholders (i.e. those with recognized speech) are known in advance and where disruption or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of governing, the accountancy calculus of risk and the technologies of expert administration or management, *announces the*

*end of politics*, annuls dissent from the consultative spaces of policymaking and evacuates the proper political from the public sphere" (Swyngedouw 2009, 609: emphasis added).

In their responses all commentators stressed the contingency of politics, which subverts any attempts to clearly distinguish between the police order and politics proper. These clarifications are, in our view, welcome and coherent. However, from an epistemological point of view it is still difficult to gauge how the insistence on the contingency of politics is served by retaining the distinction between police order and politics. Or to reformulate our argument with a question: Is it possible that the police order can reconfigure its own distribution of the sensible and give those who have no-part a part and, if so, how could we identify this empirically (cf. Featherstone, 2012, 330)? In other words, as Chambers (2011, 317) has put it, if "politics and police meet within the police order itself", if the difference between politics and the police order is contingent, an enduring "mélange" (Marchart, 2011, 132), is then the ontological politics/police distinction really helpful in understanding the messiness of actually existing urban politics (Nicholls and Uitermarks, 2016, 3)?

### **Does the post-political city lens help us understand *urban* politics?**

The responses share a concentration on the problem of the political, at the expense of the problem of the urban; hence their retreat to Rancière and others.

We believe this to be a wrong turn, which leads to weaknesses in understanding what is political about the urban and what is urban about the political.

Adopting the post-political lens entails a very open and yet still reductive way of seeing the urban: as a spatial frame of reference to distribute the sensible, the police order, or as an occasional site of, a random location for, political events that reject the police understanding of the urban (politics). A lot goes missing in this (lack of) relation of the urban to the political. For example, the urban roots of capitalist crisis and the recurring struggles associated with it; or urbanity as a way of life as well as the condition for political mobilisation in the urban realm; or the urban as a governmental category which shapes and provides fertile ground for political organisations and movements that endure and that are not only but to different degrees directed towards formal politics and other forms of governmental action (see Rodgers et al., 2014).

Alongside a tendency to avoid an engagement with the urban as a spatial category in defining the political, an informative inconsistency is also apparent in how Swyngedouw relates the political to the city. Following Rancière, Swyngedouw states that politics can "arise anywhere and everywhere" (2009, 607). But in a later piece Swyngedouw (2014a, 130) virtually synonymises the state with the police - politics "always operates at a certain minimal distance from the state/the police" (ibid.) – and goes on to outline the "spatial markers" of real politics, which "are not the parliament, meeting room or council chamber, but the public

square, the housing estate, the people's assembly, the university campus, the social centre of the factory floor" (ibid.).

Here the opposition between police and politics could not be made clearer because it is translated into space and place. And despite its innate randomness and rootlessness, politics generally appears to be occurring in exactly the urban places we would expect it to. Thus, the urban can be seen to consist, albeit provisionally, of spaces of police order and likely spaces (of less frequent) political disruption. This stress on the traditional spaces of urban politics reflects the empirical fact that the various urban uprisings of 2011 used these spaces to enact the political: the square and the street provide specifically urban opportunities for collective political action. This might not make politics specifically urban (about urban objects of contestation) but it does point to the importance of the "city" and the continuing relevance of its historical role in politics.

Obviously Swyngedouw is very aware of this and he has written very instructively and vividly about the city and (the need to reinvent) politics (e.g. Swyngedouw 2014b). But the above tensions suggest that the relation between the urban and the political needs to be better clarified. If the "spatial markers" of politics are often distinctively urban, does this not mean that we can make ontological claims about an *urban* politics? Should we not, then, urbanise the political? And if we did, what would that entail?



## **Can we imagine the political without the urban?**

The proliferation of scholarly debates on the ontological and/or epistemological specificities of the urban have made it clear that "the classical connection between urbanism and polis is now decisively occluded by the urbanization of the world" (Madden, 2012, 779). But questions remain: "(is) the urban a particular way of being political?" (Roy, 2015, 10) and is "the urban (...) the condition of possibility for the political?" (Magnusson, 2014, 1561).

It is truism to state that it is a huge challenge to bring the urban and the political onto the same horizon. The urban is notoriously and unavoidably undecidable (Roy, 2015). But the urban has political purchase exactly because its meaning is contested and evoked in a variety of ways and places. The urban is enmeshed with individual/collective hopes and fears and it unfolds in contradictory and uneven processes. Herein lies its political productivity. This means that urban politics should depart from the urban as a spatial category of politics, and see processes of urbanisation as well as the urban fabric as a way to understand and organise spatial configuration as a form of political production (cf. Magnusson 2011, 57). To bring the urban and the political under the same analytical lens involves making decisions about how we understand them and see the world, and beyond this, act within it. It ultimately involves our own personal commitments to politics and the city, which may in turn be seen as belonging to an imaginary of the urban with political import, historical narrative. Defining an ontology of urban

politics is, then, in itself political, and linked to research and political action. Thinking about the city and how we comprehend urban spaces can shape how urban actors develop strategies, shape objects of political action and become involved in a wide range of disruptive as well as sustained subjectivations.

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