

Cities and their grassroutes

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It is 30 years since the publication of the book which established 'grassroots' as a key term in urban studies. In *The City and the Grassroots*, Manuel Castells (1983) used grassroots to refer to a long history of western cities as fertile ground for political activism. Grassroots is intended to capture how urban activism is nurtured from the ground up, drawing strength from place-based political memories and solidarities. There is no doubting the enduring importance of this botanical metaphor for studies of local urban politics, nor of the continued political and intellectual relevance of *The City and the Grassroots*. The introduction to a series of short essays marking the 21st anniversary of the book (in 2004) suggested that its contributions may have become more relevant than ever in an "era of global neoliberalization, and with new social movements' ongoing struggles in the cities of the global north and south" (Ward and McCann, 2006, p. 190). Our concern in this commentary is with the inadequacy of the metaphor of 'grassroots' for capturing the more-than-local geographies of urban activism and transformation. The processes through which grass plants grow and reproduce actually involve extra-local *routes* as well as local(ized) roots and we suggest that this may be useful for extending the existing botanical metaphor to understand the politics of urban change in relational as well as territorial terms (cf. McCann and Ward, 2010).

Grass plants reproduce in two distinct ways. *Asexual* reproduction occurs through stems that grow sideways, either just above the surface of the ground (stolons) or just below it (rhizomes). Parent plants are connected to and nurture new ones. In keeping with established understandings of grassroots in urban studies, processes of asexual reproduction thus occur within a contiguous territory, at least until new plants are strong enough to survive on their own. *Sexual* reproduction in grass, in contrast, involves the propagation of new plants in sites that are not necessarily spatially contiguous with parent plants. Fertilization occurs when pollen grains, produced by the male part of a flower (the anther), are transported by wind or by animals to the female part of a flower (a stamen) resulting in the production of fertilized ovules that develop into seeds. Mature seeds can also be transferred by animals or wind before finding the right soil conditions for growth. The new plant puts down roots in the local environment, but is comprised at least partly of material from elsewhere, and has its origins in historical events that may have taken place elsewhere. Geographical patterns associated with the sexual reproduction of grass lend themselves to conceptualization of processes of urban change beyond local *grassroots*. One strand of research in urban studies and human geography to which this might readily be applied is that of urban policy mobilities. A new generation of critical urban policy scholars have a clear preference for policy 'mobilities' and 'mutations' over the more established term policy transfer (e.g. Peck, 2011). While 'transfer' connotes replication or cloning from one place to another, 'mutation' in particular draws attention to transformative dimensions: not only do the transformative impacts of a particular policy vary according to the urban contexts in which they are implanted, but policies are themselves transformed in/through this territorial grounding process. It is apt, therefore, that sexual reproduction in plants, including grasses, throws up new combinations of genetic material in potentially geographically distant sites. While new plants bear traces of sites of origin (their genetic material is inherited from the parent plants), in contrast to the products of asexual vegetative

reproduction (in which the same genetic material is effectively recycled), they are also distinctive genetic assemblages.

Mechanisms of sexual reproduction in grass appear to apply particularly well to work on urban policy mobilities and mutations, but our own concerns are borne, in part, from the limitations of that literature for understanding a diversity of more-than-local processes of urban social and political change. In particular, research on policy perhaps inevitably focuses on elite actors and spatial 'transfer agents' such as consultants and politicians, although there are strands of work which recognize that 'policy actors' may also include activists and non-elite groups who are able to influence policymaking for their own ends (McCann and Ward, 2010, p. 175; McCann, 2008). Taking *The City and the Grassroots* as our point of departure here is reflective of our concern to further decentre elite action, imaginations and aspirations in the (re)making of cities (see also Bunnell and Goh, 2012). In the wider research collaboration from which this commentary emerges, inspiration is drawn from Arjun Appadurai's work on the 'capacity to aspire', including his examination of ways in which slumdweller's horizons of possibility were extended through international exchanges and mutual learning (Appadurai, 2004; see also McFarlane, 2011 on 'translocal' learning). Our use of the term *grassroutes* in this commentary is intended to retain Castells' original emphasis on non-elite social and political action without restricting it to bounded urban localities or the territorial limits of any given city.

Castells' own work after *The City and the Grassroots* famously shifted beyond territorially-bounded and locally-rooted activisms to focus on wider flows and networks associated with capitalist globalization and technological revolution (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998).[i] His 'Network Society' is characterized by a relational network structure that, based on digital technologies, connects places through information and communication flows. Whatever happens in this communication space has direct implications for specific places, and if a subject is not part of the pattern of power that configures the network, it loses control of the capacity to alter the network according to its needs, desires, and projects. The tension between the 'space of flows' and the 'space of places' has correctly been identified as the "leitmotif" of Castells' writing on the network society (cf. Calabrese, 1999). Conceptually, such a society comes at the cost of losing its firm grounding in human agency and material space. However, the year 1999 marked an important qualification in Castells' theorisation that has been under-appreciated in the wider literature. What he termed in that year "grassrooting the space of flows," (Castells, 1999, 2000) marked a shift toward an acknowledgement that matters of choice, consciousness and experience play a crucial role in changing the dynamics of both technology and networks. In other words, Castells recognises that network flows and their underlying cultural and political dynamics and meanings can be profoundly transformed by grassroots social actors. Three further implications of 'grassrooting' are worth noting: first, a shift away from deeming network flows to be more powerful than the specific interests of the actors they connect, and towards the reassertion and reinsertion of agency from 'below'; second, renewed acknowledgement of the importance of place in people's experience, interactions and meaning-making; and, third, that conceptualization of change must attend to the 'interface' of places and flows, rather than being predicated upon their (conceptual) separation.

Although Castells subsequently chose to emphasize communicative processes of social learning and action that begin with the expression of information, rather than re-territorialising grassroots geographies and re-instating individuals as free and autonomous subjects, all three strands of his 'grassrooting' work are evident in his most recent research and writing on social movements (Castells, 2012). As he extracts commonalities from well-known movements (such as the Arab uprisings and Occupy movement) that swept across the world in 2011 and 2012, Castells pays close attention to how these movements originated, the people who participated, and the interactional dynamics between virtual and physical spaces. Emerging networks create horizontal, leaderless

solidarities among ordinary people, who then, from the safety of shared hybrid 'spaces of autonomy' (both online and urban), confront the system through diverse expressions (ibid, p. 222). These expressions indicate a two-way process of effects between spaces of places and spaces of flows. Place and spatial location are certainly implicated as 'sparks of indignation' are not only sighted (online and through various media), but also sited (in places), and resultant movements gain visibility through the (often contested) occupation of squares and other urban public spaces (see e.g. Benski et al, 2013). Moreover, for Castells, movements in the Internet Age are both local-territorial and global-relational in that they are at once connected *in situ* and throughout the world, learning from and 'inspired' (Castells, 2012, p. 223) by experiences elsewhere.

Castells chose the biological metaphor "rhizomatic revolution" when depicting the *Indignadas* movement in Spain that grew from a small network of citizens concerned with implications of the Euro crisis into close to one million determined protestors in Madrid and Barcelona alone (Castells, 2012, p. 147). The rhizome has, of course, already been widely used as a metaphor in social theory, where unstable but possibly durable webs of horizontally branching and contested relationships replace the totalizing hierarchies of binary elements associated with genealogy trees and vertically organized societies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). In the case of Castells' recent work, the rhizome metaphor of asexual reproduction works well in that it connotes growth which is both horizontal and beneath the surface of the ground: networks of 'outrage and hope' are horizontal in that they create solidaristic meanings and 'togetherness' (Castells, 2012, p. 225) in the absence of formal leadership, and grow through non-hierarchical modes of exercising power (what has recently been referred to as 'coactive' or 'non-dominating' forms of power and activism; Pearce, 2013); while new 'roots and shoots' (ibid, p. 147) are nurtured underground in ways that are not visibly measurable but which suggest possibilities for the emergence of alternative futures (and hope – for the growth of better ones). Rhizomic asexual reproduction, for Castells, is thus not about localized growth but deployed to conceptualize a process of digital media age *grassrouting* in terms of the lateral expansion of an interconnected revolutionary structure.

What does this mean for *grassrouting* in the *sexual* reproductive sense that we have suggested? For us, part of the usefulness of this metaphor lies in more ordinary, but also much more longstanding, understandings of urban social change than the spectacular revolutionary shifts that Castells ascribes to an emergent era of digital media communication. Metaphors of sexual reproduction in grass plants are useful for conceptualizing ways in which the traits of, or practices in, one (urban) locality can have effects elsewhere, even in the absence of continuously nurturing rhizomic network structures, or connection to an electronic space of flows. The travels of an individual human actor (an in-migrant, a visiting activist, a student returning home from elsewhere) or a non-human actant (a book, a manifesto, any codification or representation of an apparently-achievable future) – have long provided the 'grains' or 'seeds' from which may aspirations grow and develop in new ways in a given urban terrain. At the same time, to be heuristically faithful to our metaphor: (1) this new growth has never simply involved replication of an antecedent elsewhere; and (2) any contributory antecedents were themselves always/already a product of other constitutive elsewherees (see e.g. Massey, 2005). Senses of social and political possibility in any place or locality may be rooted in (and thereby shaped by) local cultural conditions (Appadurai, 2004), but culture – perhaps especially *urban* culture -- is itself the product of geohistorical traffic and 'routes' (Clifford, 1997).

This is not to suggest that *grassroutes* be considered chronologically prior to, or be given conceptual primacy over, *grassroots*. Viewed through the critical lens of recent queer ecologies scholarship (e.g. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010), part of the metaphorical appeal of grass plants may be precisely that they are (re)produced through *both* sexual and asexual processes – through routes and roots which can be separated heuristically but become increasingly blurred in the life and growth of any given plant. Relatedly, there is both conceptual and political appeal to the difficulty of

singling out any specific grass plant from a wider area or patch of grass. The single grass plant is perhaps metaphorically sufficient for the kind of urban social movement that Castells had in mind in *The City and the Grassroots* – one which is born, has local internal coherence and, if successful, gives birth to a next generation. However, to think instead in terms of grasslands – or of the urban as grassland – makes possible: (1) a decentring of the life and death of a single plant, allowing for less ‘reprocentric’ (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010, p. 11) conceptions of transformation; and (2) conceptual capture of constitutive ‘internal’ entanglements as well as (re)productive relations with various elsewhere. All metaphors or analogies, of course, have their limits and the one we have proffered, based as it is on a single (albeit highly diverse) family of plants, may not be sufficient to capture the kind of ‘heterotopic alliances’ that are evoked in Matthew Gandy’s (2012) queer urban ecology work. Yet the spirit in which we add the spatiality of sexual reproduction to existing metaphors associated with the grass family is one of embracing the conceptual potential of diverse biological processes, not to promote heteronormative readings of the natural world.

In the 30 years since the publication of *The City and the Grassroots*, Castells’ own interests have shifted well beyond local(ized) grassroots urban politics. In his recent work, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, this has meant a focus on networks of digital communication and associated activisms that are more-than-local, even global, in scope. Nonetheless, the grassroots metaphor has continued salience in terms of the ‘territorialization’ of urban politics in an era of globalization (McCann and Ward, 2010). Considering in addition *grassroutes*, as we have done in this commentary, brings into view intertwined relational dimensions that both precede and exceed the rhizomic possibilities described in *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. Our diversification of Castells’ original botanical metaphor extends its conceptual reach to mappings of historical (pre-information age or social media era) constitutive routes of radical politics (see e.g. Featherstone, 2008), and to a range of agents of urban transformation that may be obscured by a focus on ‘revolutionary’ digital network activisms. Like the rhizomic digital networks that are central to Castells’ recent work, the more mundane agents of *grassroutes* urban transformation that we have in mind are not necessarily progressive. But they hold progressive potential – reasons to be hopeful, not merely outraged – in ways not captured by relational/territorial policy mobilities work that has largely associated extra-local routes, mobilities and urban transformations with processes of neoliberalization (Bunnell et al 2013).

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[i] Although it should also be noted that the beginnings of this shift are evident in *The City and Grassroots* itself, not least in chapter 31 on 'The new historical relationship between space and society' (Castells, 1983).