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Urban politics beyond the urban

At first sight, defining urban politics may seem straightforward – surely we all know what it means. Presumably it's just the politics of what goes on in cities or city neighbourhoods. In practice, however, attempting to define it as an object of study is by no means as straightforward as its easy use in everyday language – or academic writing - might suggest. As soon as one begins to pick away at it, the whole notion just seems to unravel.

There is certainly a strong tradition, not only in urban studies and geography, but also within political science, that starts with the setting of the city or the urban. From this perspective urban politics is understood to be the politics of, or the political relations within, places that are cities or urban agglomerations. Such a politics is seen to be the product of an explicitly urban experience, reflecting the hierarchies and networks of power relations that emerge from it. This tradition has produced some important and thoughtful work (reflected, for example, in Robert Dahl's analysis of pluralism, David Harvey's discussion of the shift from managerialist to entrepreneurial governance; in the work of Kevin Cox and others on the local politics of territoriality; in the identification of the urban growth machine by Harvey Molotch, John Logan; and in the exploration of urban regimes by Clarence Stone and a host of followers).

However, finding ways of precisely defining the delimited space (or territory) of the 'city' within which urban politics takes place is itself problematic – where does the 'urban' end and some other political space begin? And how might one characterise that other political space?

At its simplest, of course, it might be possible to follow a similar line to that used to define the urban, so that the non urban becomes the space outside the boundaries that define the city (perhaps, then, the 'suburban' or even the 'rural'). The problem here is that it is increasingly clear that such preconceived boundary divisions make little sense, either in terms of social or political relations. Jennifer Robinson's work (see., e.g., Robinson 2005; see also Simone 2005) has emphasised the difficulty of separating peasant from urban society in the cities of the global South, while others have argued that it is precisely the move away from traditional urban forms organised around some central city that defines the contemporary urban condition (see, e.g., Dear 2001)

Approaches drawn from various forms of neo-Marxism seemed to offer hope for a while, precisely because of their promise to escape from narrow spatial fetishism. So, Manuel Castells' notion of collective consumption identified the urban with a particular aspect of capitalist reproduction and of the public policy associated with it. The politics of collective consumption was identified with the rise of urban social movements. And Lefevbre's emphasis on urbanisation as a process, with the emergence of an urban society, raised the possibility of urban politics as the politics of that society (potentially focused on 'the right to the city'). However, the former somehow managed to ignore some of the key aspects of urban politics, which focused on economic development (picked up by the theorists of urban growth coalitions and regimes), and the hoped for urban social movement stubbornly failed to materialise. Meanwhile the latter effectively implies that all politics is now 'urban'. Unfortunately this leaves us with no very convincing non-urban realm, which may not be a problem

for Lefebvre but is for those seeking to identify any distinctive sphere of 'urban' politics.

From a relatively straightforward set of understandings, in other words, it now looks as if all our attempts at understanding leave us in a sort of theoretical cul de sac. Maybe it would be better just to go back to developing a series of more or less sophisticated case studies.

However, it seems to me that there remain exciting possibilities which deserve to be explored¹. The first remains rooted in the lived experiences of the urban, but in ways that reflect what Doreen Massey (2005) has called the 'throwntogetherness of place', which points to the more mundane ways in which urban social existence is put together and highlights the extent to which cities continue to be the sites where a range of different political outcomes may be explored and struggled over. From this perspective the territorial boundaries are of less significance than the sets of relations which help to construct those experiences, so that, for example, in his discussion of 'prosaic sites of multicultural' Ash Amin is able to identify a micropolitics where 'much of the negotiation of difference occurs at the very local level through everyday experiences and encounters' (Amin 2002, p. 959). The urban is understood as the space within which sets of relationships overlap, settle and come together, with a particular intensity.

If this is one way into a non-territorial but still fundamentally 'placed' urban politics, a second relates to the recognition that urban politics needs to be understood as assembled, in ways that reflect the extent to which places are the product of relations which stretch across space, far beyond the administrative or other boundaries that help to define them. This implies that urban politics – in particular places – will also reflect interests and conflicts apparently drawn from elsewhere, while even the most apparently local of political actors may actively reach out to draw in policy lessons and political understandings developed in quite other contexts. From this standpoint, in other words, the urban and urban politics are assembled and put together in place, yet are shaped by the nature of their connections to elsewhere rather than being limited by the territorial boundaries of particular urban spaces. This is an active and continuing process of learning, borrowing and misinterpretation (often, but not only, enabled by networks of consultants) which encourages the co-production of urban and global public policy and politics, making up and giving material form to actually existing neo-liberalisms, their discontents and resistances (see, e.g., McCann and Ward 2010; Porter and Shaw 2008).

In a sense, this is a case for a politics of the urban beyond the urban, which is nevertheless predicated on a recognition of the importance of the specificity of the (local, global, regional, national) entanglements that define particular cities. It does not replace but, rather, runs alongside not only territorial understandings (which continue to provide an important focus for political mobilisation) but also, equally important, those which focus on the overlapping administrative hierarchies of government and state.

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¹ The arguments that follow draw directly on work I have been undertaking with John Allen.