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Political agency between urban and transnational spaces

Clive Barnett

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Introduction

This chapter examines critical theories of democracy which are concerned with the type of legitimacy that is exercised through various forms of transnational political agency. By focusing on the specific normative principle that underwrites these theories – the principle of all affected interest – the chapter highlights the importance of recognizing that a great deal of ‘transnational political agency’ might also be regarded as *urbanized*. The aim of this chapter is to expand the understanding of the sorts of actors and activities to which ‘agency’ can be plausibly attributed in describing the emergence of contemporary forms of transnational political agency. Realising this aim requires a consideration of the necessarily *mediated* qualities of political agency, and the associated *de-centering* of models of agency as the preserve of conventional political actors, whether these are political parties, states or voters. Three forms of mediation of political agency will be addressed: mediation through networks of communicative action, through modes of representative claims-making, and through the distributed effects of combinations of humans, technologies, and conventions. Section I discusses theorists of transnational democracy who focus on the political agency of ‘bottom-up’ contentious social movements in democratizing processes. The agency attributed to social movements is understood as being enacted in distributed fields of

communicative action. In Section II, it is argued that if the theoretical emphasis on communicative action as a medium of democratic political agency is recognized, then this increases the significance of situated contexts in which grievances emerge. Section III outlines an agenda for investigating the relationships between the situated contexts of being affected by temporally and spatially extensive socio-economic processes and the generation of transnational political agency.

I. Theorizing transnational democratic political agency

There is now an extensive social science literature on the emergence of transnational social movements (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998, Tarrow 2005b, Miller 2004), and there is a sense in this literature that such movements are *de facto* signs of healthy democratizing tendencies. However, we might pause to question just why they should be automatically considered democratic. As Sidney Tarrow and others have argued, there is a tendency to over state the degree to which nation-states have been hollowed out or circumvented. Even where ‘global’-scale activities of governance or mobilization are evident, it remains the case that any ‘nascent global civil sphere’, as Alexander (2006, 523) calls it, ‘has none of the institutions that, in a fully functioning democracy, allow public opinion to produce civil power and thus regulate the state, such as independent courts, party competition, and elections’ (ibid., 523). The primary institutional feature of the nascent global civil sphere is, Alexander suggests, are the communicative practices it is coordinated. It is within this field of communication ‘that international institutions and nongovernmental organizations create forms of governmentality, from agreements over labor conditions and world health to regulations about environment and land mines’ (ibid.).

Social scientists and social theorists therefore identify the emergent qualities of 'transnational social movements' or 'global civil society' as lying in the distinctively communicative modalities of coordination and integration through which these formations develop and extend. It is amongst political theorists and political philosophers, however, that one finds the most explicit discussion of why transnational political agency might indicate new and distinctive forms of democratization (e.g. Keane 2009). Theorists of deliberative democracy in particular assert that the putative democratizing energy of transnational modes of political agency arises from communicative practices enacted at a global scale. For example, in his account of the post-national constellation, Habermas (2001) argues that political systems operating beyond the nation-state, such as international human rights policy, are primarily 'steered' through communicative practices and are therefore liable to forms of democratic legitimation. According to this view, democratic political agency is effectively disembodied, dispersed into 'subjectless flows of communication'. This conceptual shift transforms the understanding of democratic legitimacy:

[T]he democratic procedure no longer draws its legitimizing force only, indeed not even predominantly, from political participation and the expression of political will, but rather from the general accessibility of a deliberative process whose structure grounds an expectation of rationally acceptable results (ibid., 110).

Normatively, Habermas's perspective disperses legitimacy into the networks of communication of the sort which Alexander and other social theorists identify as emergent features of 'global' civil spheres. At the same time, this dispersal relies to a considerable

degree on the political agency of social movements, non-governmental organizations, and advocacy coalitions in raising issues, articulating claims, and facilitating dialogue. In short, if communicative action, or ‘discourse’, is the primary medium of ‘global’ coordination, so the argument goes, then the relevant agents of the democratization of global processes are those with the capacity to engage in certain sorts of discursive contestation.

It is amongst democratic theorists working a post-Habermasian vein of critical theory that these two related conceptual shifts – the dispersal of legitimacy into networks of communication, and the re-embodiment of political agency in specific types of organizations and institutions – are developed most explicitly into accounts of transnational political agency as a democratizing force. It is important to recognize the importance ascribed in this tradition of critical theory to the principle of ‘all affected interests’ as a principle of democratic legitimacy. According to this basic rule, ‘what affects all must be agreed to by all’ (Tully 2008, 74). This principle is at work in Habermas’s refashioning of democratic legitimacy as inhering in the ‘general accessibility’ of communicative practices discussed above. Habermas’s formulation illustrates the translation of the ‘all affected interest’ principle of democratic participation into the idiom of the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984, Habermas 1996). Rather than assuming that political agency necessarily involves participation in discrete, specific deliberative forums or decision-making processes, from this perspective it is the degree of openness and inclusiveness of ongoing communicative practices which is key criterion of democratization. This translation of the ‘all affected interests’ principle into the idiom of the theory of communicative action, via Habermasian discourse ethics, has two

implications for how we understand political agency.

First, it implies that the idea of all-affectedness should not necessarily be thought of as a transcendent normative principle of adjudication. Rather, it is better understood as one register amongst other through which political agency is articulated in ongoing, worldly political contention (Fraser 2008). That is, contemporary vocabularies of grievance, contention and mobilization make claims about the inappropriate *exclusion* of people from involvement in decisions which adversely affect them, and invoke norms of *inclusion* forums where matters of shared consequence are determined (Young 2000).

Second, as we have already seen, the dispersal of democratic legitimacy depends on the communicative activities of social movement organizations, NGOs and advocacy coalitions. The understanding of the all-affected principle as a communicative register of claims-making means that these actors are now thought of as necessarily involved in various types of representative agency (Barnett 2003) - they are now understood as the mediums through which accusations of exclusion and appeals for inclusion are articulated on behalf of wider constituencies.

These two implications of the shift to understanding all-affectedness as a register of claims-making have been most fully developed by strands of critical theory which focus less on issues of governance and more on the contestatory energies of subaltern politics, and which combine aspects of Habermas's theory of communicative action with insights from pragmatism, feminist theory and republican theories of freedom and self-government (see

Cochran 2002, Scheuerman 2006, Young 2007). Here one finds an understanding of political agency as enacted from the bottom up by movements, advocacy coalitions and NGOs. Theorists working in this vein conceptualize democratic political agency as operating across borders but not beyond them, acknowledging the continuing relevance of nation-states as effective containers of political agency (Bohman 2007); as located in distributed publics, rather than singular, unified, bounded publics (ibid.); and as articulated in networks of discourse, rather than mediated solely through parties or elections (Dryzek 2006). And, importantly, in their emphasis on 'transnational' processes, they do not suppose that these sorts of agency necessarily constitute a singular 'global' scale of activity. Rather, the configurations of transnational political agency they envisage are understood to enact democratic legitimacy through a broad array of modalities of 'influence' operating across a variety of spatial scales (Fung 2010).

We need to acknowledge here that a central premise of contemporary critical theory is that public opinion is the key medium of democratization. Nancy Fraser (2008) argues that globalization challenges the empirical assumptions of the Habermasian theory of the public sphere upon which the normative claim made on behalf of public opinion is based. Above, the settled conceptualizations of the spaces in which criteria of normative legitimacy and political efficacy are enacted appear to be under strain. It has become difficult to maintain the assumption that the *demos* in which questions of legitimacy are settled is or should be equivalent to a national public, or that the sole agent of legitimate will-formation and decision is or should be the nation-state and its surrogates. In response to these challenges, Fraser uses the all-affected principle as the basis for reimagining the geographies of

democratic agency. She argues that the principle of legitimacy in Habermas's 'classic' account of the public sphere as a medium of democratic political agency, which rests on inclusiveness and participatory parity, conflates two analytically distinct issues: *membership* and *affectedness*. In Fraser's view, in a globalized world, the principle of affectedness trumps membership as a criterion of democratic inclusion. According to Fraser, activists are now applying the all-affected principle directly in framing justice claims 'without going through the detour of state-territoriality' (2008, 25). They do so, she argues, by engaging in a contestatory politics of representation which seeks to re-frame the spatial scales at which the subjects, objects and agents of justice-claims are articulated into effective patterns of action. As noted above, the vocabulary of affectedness is the worldly register through which this politics of representation is generated. Fraser develops this understanding of the worldliness of the all-affected principle as a register of political contention into a new conceptualization of democratic political agency. She argues that the conditions which have to be met by transnational mobilizations to satisfy democratic criteria are very stringent indeed:

Henceforth, public opinion is legitimate if and only if it results from a communicative process in which all potentially affected can participate as peers, *regardless of political citizenship*. Demanding as it is, this new, post-Westphalian understanding of legitimacy constitutes a genuinely critical standard for evaluating existing forms of publicity in the present era. (ibid, 96)

Furthermore, Fraser's account of the 'scales of justice' presupposes that the putative legitimacy of transnational political agency depends also on a parallel development of transnational authority structures to which such agency can address its claims. In sum, for

Fraser, transnational political agency is articulated through claims of affectedness which seek to expand representation in decision-making processes, and these claims are enacted by the representative agency of social movement actors.

Like Fraser, John Dryzek's offers a distinctive account of the relationship between social movements, claims of affectedness and representative agency. Dryzek's conceptualization of transnational democracy holds that globalization is a process in which 'the locus of political control has increasingly moved into the international arena' (2000, 5). For Dryzek, democratization does not require the development of formal agencies of democratic governance in the international arena, but rather depends on the ongoing development of networked forms of organization – forms which work through and across existing territorial formations, rather than transcending them to a 'global' scale 'above' that of nation-states. Dryzek's argument is that any democratization of the international system cannot be envisaged along the same lines as democracy within states – to hold to this image seems to imply creating a whole new set of institutions to replace the existing international system. Dryzek locates the potential for democratizing the international system in the distinctively communicative force embodied by transnational networks whatever their geographical shape or scale. Dryzek therefore refines the understanding of the agents of democratization in two related ways. First, his argument is that transnational political processes, including war and terrorism, are steered by 'global constellations of discourses' (Dryzek 2006, 93). This argument informs Dryzek's strong claim that the international system is integrated by a variety of discourses with causal power - including discourses of human rights, market liberalism, sustainable development, and the rules of war - and therefore is susceptible to

discursive interventions by movement activists. The second refinement in Dryzek's account of democratic agency is of a more normative order. Compared to Fraser, Dryzek identifies the dynamic of democratization more one-sidedly with contestatory mobilization by social movements, non-governmental agencies, and transnational advocacy networks, and explicitly rejects the idea that it involves the formation of new institutional complexes of governance.

Dryzek's account of transnational democracy challenges some of the key assumptions about the types of political agency through which democratization is generated. Most notably, in Dryzek's refashioning of deliberative democracy as discursive democracy, the key criterion of democratic inclusion is the effective representation of discourses, rather than of persons (see Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008; Saward 2010). By making explicit the problematic relationship between highly participatory norms of deliberation and more 'attenuated', mediated styles of engagement, Dryzek is raising the question of whether and how the inclusive ethics of deliberative theories of democracy can be squared with equally compelling imperatives to extend the all-affected principle to include non-human 'actants' (see Eckersley 2000, Latour 2004b, O'Neill 2001, Tully 2008). The normative claim about democratic legitimacy which results from shifting the focus of political agency from a deliberative subject to a process of representation is much weaker than the one developed by Fraser:

Democratic legitimacy is to be found in the degree to which collective decisions are consistent with the constellation of discourses existing within the public sphere, in the degree to which this balance is itself under the decentralized control of reflective,

competent, and informed actors (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, 484-5).

Dryzek's discursive conceptualization of transnational democracy therefore invests heavily in a particular account of the modes of integration characteristic of international politics, one which emphasizes the agency of discourses. And it displays a strong preference for the democratizing agency of contestatory social movement activism, located in the public sphere and only weakly engaged with sites of authoritative and binding decision-making. In sum, for Dryzek, opportunities for political agency are distributed across networks of discourses, and thereby enacted by social movements, understood as collective actors engaged in discursive contestation.

James Bohman (2007) also locates the force of transnational democratization in the 'bottom-up' agency of civil society and the public sphere, but he provides a much stronger account of the normative principles for judging such agency as more or less democratic. Bohman links a specific understanding of political agency to a particular understanding of the normative content of democratic politics. The same relationship is implicit in Fraser's account of the scales of justice. In the development of this account, Fraser has shifted away from simply affirming that the all-affected principle should be 'directly applied' as if it were an objective, causal standard discoverable by social scientists. She has developed a more refined principle of 'all-subjected' as a benchmark of democratic inclusion, referring to situations in which norms of inclusion are shaped by experiences of being subjected to the 'arbitrary interference' of others on the basis of interests or opinions not shared by those so affected. Implicit in this notion of all-subjected, without being fully spelled out by Fraser, is a distinctive normative principle in which the primary value of democratic

politics is understood to be non-domination, as distinct from the liberal principle of non-interference (cf. Pettit 2001). It is this emphasis on non-domination as the normative energy around which democratic political agency forms that Bohman makes explicit. In his account, democratic political agency is generated by shared experiences of domination, where domination refers not just to tyranny or arbitrary interference, but also to specifically modern situations of ‘rule by another’ ‘who is able to prescribe the terms of cooperation’ (Bohman 2007, 9). It is this emphasis on situations of domination which underwrites Bohman’s account of the distinctive spatial forms through which transnational political agency is articulated under conditions of globalization. If political agency is generated by situations of domination, then this leads Bohman to identify both the *problem* and the *promise* generated by globalization for how we conceptualize the spaces of effective political agency.

Bohman (2007, 7) argues that the *problem* that globalization presents to understandings of democratic political agency which depend on notions of territorialized, national containers is that it is a process that generates situations in which more and more people are exposed to domination:

[T]he current distribution of global political authority produces situations in which many people lack the very minimum of normative powers and control over their own rights and duties: they lack the capacity to make claims of justice and to initiate deliberation, and in lacking this power are subject to normatively arbitrary political domination.

Although substantively similar to Fraser’s, Bohman’s argument is a more exact statement

of the specifically anti-democratic harm generated by globalization. Crucial to Bohman's account is his reconceptualization of the all-affected principle in terms of 'indeterminate effects'. The importance of this idea is that it complicates any straightforward calculation of domination. Bohman presents global activities not as primarily characterized by their spatial and temporal scope, but rather by their *indefinite* qualities: '[A] normative theory is better served by seeing how global activities do not necessarily affect everyone, or even the majority of people, in the same way. Rather, the sort of social activities in question affect *indefinite* numbers of people' (ibid., 24). From Bohman's perspective, the indefinite character of affectedness under globalization means that some actors are implicated in the activities of others without having consented to their inclusion. Bohman's account of globalization in terms of 'interdependence via indefinite social activity' supports the centrality accorded in his account of democratic agency to the normative principle of non-domination. On the one hand, differences in degrees of affectedness as well the indefinite quality of affectedness mean that affected actors cannot be easily individuated. This means the conditions for transnational democratic agency cannot be deduced by discerning a kind of 'global' basic structure, based on freely entered into cooperative activity of the kind envisaged in post-Rawlsian accounts of global egalitarian justice (Pogge 2001), and in contrast to which situations of domination might in principle be identified. On the other hand, if the indefinite quality of global activities means that the contractual version of global justice cannot serve its purpose, then the idea of 'interdependence via indefinite social activity' does establish the practical scope of political obligation, because this effectively describes the conditions for domination across national boundaries: 'the circumstances of global politics emerge through nonvoluntary inclusion in indefinite

cooperative schemes' (Bohman 2007, 25).

For Bohman, then, globalization potentially expands the conditions under which political agency might emerge in so far as it expands the scope of domination, understood as the 'nonvoluntary inclusion in indefinite cooperative schemes' (ibid., 25). If globalization expands and multiplies situations of domination, then for Bohman, herein also lies the *promise* of expanded and reconfigured styles of democratic political agency. Like Dryzek, he sees in globalization more potential than Fraser does for effective democratization without the need for new institutional configurations. In so far as the globalization of communications offers opportunities for people to recognize each other and communicate as participants in various public spheres, then it also presents a medium for challenging domination. Bohman's argument is that the democratic institutions required to secure non-domination are already nascent in our globalized world and that no institutional scaling-up of the kind envisaged by Fraser is necessary: '[T]he capacity to initiate deliberation about the terms of democracy itself is distributed among the *dêmoi* of various units and levels' (ibid., 174). Understanding transnational democratic political agency, in Bohman's view, therefore requires a shift in the conceptualization of the *subject* of democracy, away from the singular demos tied to the sovereign integrity of a territory, towards a more plural view of multiple *dêmoi*. Like Dryzek's, Bohman's understanding of democracy leans heavily towards the communicative criteria of democratic control, and away from the authoritative criteria of administrative efficacy that Fraser insists must also play an important role in a critical theory of democracy.

In this section, we have seen how theorists of transnational democracy, building on the insights of post-Habermasian critical theory, develop a distinctive understanding of political agency which is marked by two related conceptual moves: they relocate democratic legitimacy into dispersed fields of communicative action; and they identify contentious social movements and advocacy networks as enacting political agency through their claims-making activities in these fields. Both of these moves are related to a conceptual translation of the principle of all affected interests into the idiom of the theory of communicative action, which for these theorists of transnational political agency is taken to imply the geographical extension, even de-territorialization, of democratic politics to scales that exceed those of the nation-state. In the next section, by focusing on further implications of the translation of affectedness into the idioms of the theory of communicative action, it will be argued that any spatial *extension* of the conceptual scope of political agency needs to be matched by continued attention to the geographical *situatedness* from which political agency emerges.

II. Situating transnational political agency

In the previous section, we saw how critical theorists of transnational democracy develop Habermas's translation of the 'all affected interests' principle into a theory of communicative action to reconceptualize effective democratic political agency as being contingent on inclusion and participation in spatially dispersed communicative practices. This section builds on this work to argue that, once this emphasis on communicative action as a medium of democratic political agency is made clear, then the importance of attending to *situated* contexts out of which grievances emerge, are recognized, and are mobilized

needs to be fully acknowledged in any account of democratic political agency. The conceptual translation of the all-affectedness in post-Habermasian theory into the idioms of communicative action theory is related to a downplaying of the strongly epistemological inflection of rationality that is retained by Habermas, in favour of a more expansive sense of the communicative and affective conditions of experiences of harm, disrespect and injustice (e.g. Honneth 2007, Young 2001). This pluralization of the communicative registers through which claims of affectedness are articulated highlights two related dimensions of the situations out of which democratic political agency emerges. First, the conceptual translation of the all-affected principle implies a methodological focus on the dynamic role of contestation in democratization, drawing attention to the situated contexts in which felt senses of 'justice violated' emerge and are articulated as political claims (Honneth 2007, 11). Second, understanding these contestatory processes of claims-making requires an analysis of the situated contexts in which capacities to form solidarities, learn to be affected, and engage with distant strangers are developed and sustained. Combining these two dimensions, we can see that the emphasis amongst post-Habermasian theorists of transnational political agency on the conditions under which contentious action is generated requires also an acknowledgement of the importance that other theorists within this same tradition ascribe to situated contexts as vital infrastructures in which grievances are generated and recognized and in which expansive democratic political imaginations are learned. This section looks at the how this attention to situated contexts might be usefully theorised by combining insights from critical theory with insights from critical spatial theory in urban studies and human geography.

The previous section discussed how post-Habermasian theorists of transnational democracy challenge normative assumptions about the shapes and scales of political agency, and in so doing move towards less stringent models of legitimacy than are found in 'strong' models of deliberative democracy. This shift stems in part from a move to include in the conceptualisation of democratic a wider set of agents and to encompass various technologies, mediums and practices through which agency is performed. The pluralization of agency is associated with the development of distinctive spatial imaginaries which emphasize dispersed and distributed practices of agency that are assembled across networks, in contrast to imaginaries which think of political agency as a capacity that moves up and down 'levels'. As already indicated, the conceptual translation of the idea of all affected interests from a causal principle into a communicative register of claims-making is crucial to this expansive sense of political agency. An important aspect of this tradition of critical theory is its debt to American philosophical pragmatism, a debt which is evident in the understanding of affectedness as a condition that combines situated responses to problems with a movement towards universalism, where universalism is understood in relation to the practice of perspective-taking derived from Mead (see Benhabib 1992). This emphasis on the situated qualities that generate political agency requires us to supplement the emphasis upon processes of spatial extension that in the work of Fraser, Dryzek and Bohman with a consideration of contexts which shape the modes of transnational agency they focus upon.

The emphasis on situated contexts in which expansive political agency is generated and made possible is evident in the work of critical theorists such as Seyla Benhabib and Craig

Calhoun. Benhabib (2004, 2006) provides an account of the iterative reconstitution of cosmopolitan democratic legitimacy at the national scale which seeks to reconcile dual imperatives of universalization and situated engagement. Her reconstruction of cosmopolitanism as necessarily situated somewhere, rather than being a detached global feeling, overlaps with and is strengthened by the cautious defence of nationalism and nation-states provided by Craig Calhoun (2007). Both these theorists emphasize that there are territorialized cultural formations which provide resources for solidarity and integration upon which the capacities to imaginatively identify with and practically engage in the politics of humanitarian concern, cosmopolitan rights or global justice depend.

Benhabib's and Calhoun's treatments of nationalism, membership and the conditions of social solidarity bring back into view the full implications of translating the all-affected principle into the idioms of the theory of communicative action for how we conceptualize the spaces of transnational political agency. While this translation of the all affected principle might in theory extend the scope of any potential demos beyond territorial limits, it also presumes a heightened concern for the contexts of social integration through which communicative capacities are developed and learnt. Recognizing the importance of what Latour (2004a) calls 'learning to be affected' to the generation of political agency requires us to supplement the expansive geographical imagination of theorists of transnational political agency with a focus upon the emplaced situations in which the 'cognitive potential' for intuitive senses of 'justice violated' to be explicitly recognized and acted upon is realized (Honneth 1995, 138). These contexts certainly need not be territorialized, but it is reasonable to suppose that they do often remain in important ways embedded in

infrastructures and practices of national culture, rhythms of urban living, and emplaced practices of everyday life. The communicative translation of the all-affected principle central to theories of transnational democracy requires us, in short, to take seriously not only the de-territorializing effects of globalized chains of cause and consequence, but also the geographies in which capacities to acknowledge the claims of others are learned and capacities to act on these claims located.

The importance of attending to the situated contexts out of which political agency emerges is underscored when we recall Bohman's account of globalization as expanding the scope of domination; and if we recall too the emphasis in post-Habermasian critical theory, for example in the work of Axel Honneth (2007) or Iris Marion Young (2001), on affectedness less as a rational procedure of deduction but rather as an affective register through which felt senses of injustice are expressed. In Nancy Fraser's work in particular, these two emphases combine to place a premium on understanding all-affectedness as the register in which contemporary transnational politics is articulated through practices of contentious claims-making. In the emphasis on claims-making, this strand of critical theory has strong affinities with empirically-oriented social theory on transnational social movements (e.g. Olesen 2005, Della Porta and Tarrow 2004), and with recent geographical work on movement activity as an assemblage of diverse spatial strategies of claims-making (e.g. Leitner *et al.* 2008, Boudreau 2007). And in both these strands of work, one finds an emphasis on the different roles that cities play in the emergence and stabilization of transnational political agency (e.g. Appadurai 2001, Diani 2005). For example, Sassen (2008) argues that the concentration of global corporate and financial command and control

functions in 'global cities' provides the infrastructure from which networks of alternative globalization activism emerge. And Smith (2001) argues that urban-based grassroots movements play a highly pro-active role in generating patterns of contemporary globalization (see also Magnusson 1994).

While literature on transnational social movements tends to work via a conceptual opposition of 'the local' to the 'global' (e.g. Stark *et al.* 2006, Tarrow 2005a), urban studies and human geography literatures provide an alternative understanding of how to think of the spaces transnational political agency. In this literature which literature, we are invited to think less of two scales – the local/urban and the global – but rather in terms of practices with variable extension and reach (Allen 2009). As with critical theorists of transnational democracy, the idea of all affected interests is an animating principle in claims by geographers and urban theorists that globalization calls for the need to rethink the political geographies of democracy. For example, Amin, Thrift and Massey (2005) argue that there is a need to respatialize the democratic imagination to match the scope and complexity of globalized interactions. Their claim is that current practices of representative democracy exclude some affected persons from decision-making in so far as these practices are still imagined and institutionalized as being territorialized at the scale of the nation-state. For these theorists, however, the argument about the expanded scope of globalized processes is aligned to arguments about the heightened significance of cities in gathering together, coordinating and configuring globalized and transnational flows of people, goods and ideas (e.g. Amin and Thrift 2006, Massey 2007).

Neo-Marxist explanations of urbanization under neoliberal globalization provide the clearest account of how the processes which theorists of transnational political agency focus on – the generation of grievances around felt senses of injustice and the mobilization of capacities to act to mitigate these grievances - are internally related to an intensification of various sorts of urbanized contention. In these analyses, the ‘hollowing out’ of state capacities at the national level has been undertaken through the progressive re-scaling of governance, welfare and accumulation functions to the level of the city-region (e.g. Brenner 2004, Swyngedouw 2000). It is argued that this re-scaling is internally related to an increasingly unstable dynamic of accumulation that is resolved and expressed through ever accelerating rounds of creative destruction of the urban built environment.

Neo-Marxist analyses of urban neoliberalism provide the theoretical frame for the growing interest in the concept of the ‘right to the city’ (e.g. Dikeç and Gilbert 2002, Holston 2007, Marcuse *et al.* 2009). One step along this path has involved the argument that, as Merrifield and Swyngedouw (1995) put it, injustice is being increasingly urbanized. The implication is that more and more political contention is generated by the deepening dependence of social reproduction on urban infrastructures, through which state capacities and the logics of accumulation reach into everyday life. The ‘right to the city’ literature supposes that there is a cluster of activities that count as ‘urban politics’ not just because they take place in particular places – cities - but because they revolve around urbanized issues of contention (the concentrated, material conditions of social reproduction) and around distinctively urbanized value-claims – the right to certain minimal standards of habitability, or ‘inhabitation’ (Purcell 2007). The ‘right to the city’ has also been made central to an

assertion that urban politics now has a global importance in driving radical democratic possibilities in the contemporary conjuncture. In David Harvey's (2005, 2008) account of neoliberalism, the struggle against the hegemony of finance capital should be centred on the 'right to the city', since the inherent dynamic for the overaccumulation of capital finds its unstable resolution in the financialized recycling of capital surpluses into the creative destruction of urban environments. In Harvey's (2009) analysis of neoliberalism, the 'right to the city' is therefore made central to a view of urban politics which is not restricted to the politics that goes on in cities and is simply directed at urban-scaled institutions, but which is cosmopolitan in its scope and ambition.

The 'right to the city' literature therefore makes two important contributions to understanding the geographies of contemporary transnational political agency. First, it alights upon and elaborates the substantive, distinctively spatial content of the norms shaping varied forms of contentious urban politics around the world that are increasingly gathered under the 'right to the city' heading. Second, it provides a clear account of how a great deal of urban politics, understood in this expansive sense, is articulated with processes which have national, transnational and global reach. Combining these two aspects brings into view the ways in which transnational political agency is shaped by the objects and opportunities generated by urbanization processes. Understanding urbanization in the expansive sense developed by urban theorists helps us see that the normative energies of exemplary forms of 'transnational political agency' – including a great deal of environmental politics, human rights politics, the politics of gender and sexuality, and anti-poverty movements – have specifically 'spatial' contents relating to claims about

dispossession, access, habitability, privacy and publicity.

As the name suggests, the ostensible normative focus of the ‘right to the city’ paradigm tends to be on claims about rights, equality, and social justice. However, the all-affected principle is implicit, in two ways, in the attempt to connect these concerns to the specifically *democratic* problem of who should be included in decision-making processes, and how. First, it underwrites the argument that the relocation of key decision-making processes (particularly regarding welfare provision and labour market regulation) to new structures of urban and regional governance is undemocratic in so far as it continues to exclude those subject to the resultant decisions. Second, the principle is implicit in the argument that neoliberalism has political significance in so far as it affects not only those people located in cities, but impacts upon everyone and anyone dependent on material infrastructures of care, education, housing, water and welfare. Acknowledging that urbanization processes generate the conditions for the potential emergence of communities of affected interest – as sites for the experiences of both the domination emphasized by Bohman’s account of the harms of globalization and the disempowering effects of territorially framed citizenship rights emphasized by Fraser – opens up an agenda for analysing the contingent formation of different aspects of urban affectedness into assemblages of transnational political agency. The next section will outline this agenda.

III. Theorising the situated contexts of transnational political agency

In the previous two sections, we saw that the same principle of all affected interests is at

work in claims about both the democratic significance of the globalization of economic, social and political impacts and about the enhanced political significance of urban and regional scales of governance. Democratic values are at stake in these processes in so far as they throw into question whether people being affected by decisions are effectively included in shaping those decisions. As we saw in Section I, in the literature on transnational democracy, globalization is presented as requiring more expansive principles of inclusion to match the scope of affected interests. In urban studies and human geography, the urbanization of neoliberalism is presented as requiring an opening-up of privatized styles of subnational governance to all those affected by decisions increasingly taken outside of the channels of formal representative democracy. Furthermore, these two fields converge around a shared sense, often only implicit in the transnational democracy literature, but explicit in urban studies and human geography, that spatially extensive modes of democratic political agency emerge from situated contexts of experience of domination, harm and injustice (Brenner 2009). This section outlines a research agenda for investigating how transnational political agency is rooted in and routed through urbanized contexts, an agenda which identifies three analytically distinct aspects of affectedness through this relationship between the transnational and the urban is mediated.

The three aspects of affectedness identified below correspond to the three ‘moments’ identified by Dewey (1927) in his account of the formation of democratic publics. These are an aspect of being affected in a causal sense; an aspect of identification and caring, of ‘learning to be affected’; and an aspect of concerted agency, of being able to act. These three aspects overlap with three prevalent ways in which urbanists have claimed that cities

have a special relationship with politics (e.g. Amin and Thrift 2006): a causal understanding of the city as an arena of capital accumulation and social reproduction; a cultural understanding of the city as an expanded public space, in which patterns of social interaction provide the opportunities for addressing strangers over matters of pressing shared concern; and a political understanding of the city as a jurisdictional scale, a seat of government or a set of governance practices in which citizenship rights are exercised. Bringing together Dewey's three moments with these three understandings urban politics yields the three aspects of affectedness through which contemporary urbanization processes can be thought of as generating contemporary patterns of transnational political agency. First, the urbanization of capital can be conceptualized as playing a key role in generating the objects of contention around which transnational communities of affected interest are assembled. Second, urbanism can be understood as a dimension of public communication, as a medium for learning to be affected, and as a setting in which strategies of transnational political agency are learned, coordinated and organized. And third, the urban is often conceptualized as the most effective scale of concerted public action in response to 'global' problems of various sorts, whether as a seat of local governance or as a medium of transnational citizenship action. I shall now briefly elaborate on the issues raised by this redescription of the urban dynamics which generate transnational political agency.

Urbanization and the generation of objects of contentious agency

Under the first aspect of affectedness, urbanization is understood as generating of particular objects of contention or intervention. An example is the argument of Castells (1983) in which urban politics is understood to emerge around particular types of grievance and

contention generated by conflicts over the organization of extended social reproduction. Likewise, in Harvey's (1985) analysis of 'the urbanization of capital', which informs more recent discussions of the 'right to the city', the urban is understood as a material configuration in which contradictory dynamics of class struggle are inscribed and their political manifestations become evident. In these traditions of theorizing urban politics, political solidarities are formed by actors finding themselves equally affected by spatial decision-making processes to which they are subjected – for example, decisions about investment of surplus capital; decisions about the management and distribution of welfare goods and services; or the more dispersed effects of decisions shaping the crisis-induced devaluation of housing through the unstable dynamics of urbanized financial speculation.

In short, the political economy of urban development can generate the conditions for the emergence of transnational political agency. Increasing proportions of the capital flowing through the built environments of urban areas and expanding city-regions throughout the world is multi-national, and is sluiced through the infrastructures of global financial markets. This is one key arena through which the residents, citizens and denizens of urban areas are exposed to the 'indeterminate effects' of globalization discussed by Bohman. However, as Bohman's analysis of globalization as 'interdependence via indefinite social activity' suggests, there is nothing automatic about the emergence of contentious politics in response to the global forces which causally generate so much urban disruption, inequality, and injustice. As Marres (2005) argues, being affected by some process is not enough, in itself, to account for the emergence of contention as an *issue* of shared concern into the public realm. These conditions need to be *made* into issues. But in accounting for how

these conditions have been articulated into effective political agency, we the need to move on from the objective account of urbanization as a political-economic process generative of objects of contention, towards a sense of the urban as a communicative milieu in which issues of shared public concern emerge as topics of public debate, deliberation and dispute.

Urbanism as a medium of political agency

If urban dynamics generate potential issues of contention, then urbanized infrastructures and patterns of interaction also provide a distinctive medium for practices of opinion-formation and mobilization. The distinctive communicative aspects of urbanism play two roles in assembling transnational communities of affected interest.

First, the distinctive rhythms and routines of dynamic interaction characteristic of urbanism shape the capacities to be affected which are crucial to understanding the formation of publics around issues of shared concern. Urban spaces and urbanized infrastructures provide the background for the diffuse communicative lifeworlds in which shared narratives of dispossession, discrimination, and injustice are circulated and reproduced. These lifeworld contexts shape and constrain activists' strategies and the capacity of locally organised mobilizations to reach out across space (e.g. Diani 2005, Nelson 2003).

Second, the uneven urbanization of global governance and corporate control functions provokes particular styles of network organization and coordination through which transnational publics of affected interest have developed. International politics, in other words, goes on in particular places, at particular times, and this points to the relevance that

a second dimension of 'the urban' as a communicative field has to do with the generation of transnational political agency. The observable geographical embeddedness of transnational activist and advocacy networks underscores the importance of cities in mediating the emergence of 'global civil society' and 'transnational publics', not least as locations for key events through which global policy making is performed in real time and coordinated through time (e.g. Barnett and Scott 2007, Lindquist 2004). The uneven geography of transnational civil society has implications for the strategic coordination of advocacy and activist networks. Legal cases, conferences on international governance, and corporate AGMs are event-spaces that configure the temporal rhythms of activism and advocacy campaigns and the contours of the spatial translation of international policy initiatives across different scales of global governance advocacy.

Cities as agents of change?

From the Deweyan perspective on affectedness that informs deliberative and discursive theories of transnational political agency, a crucial aspect of the formation of publics is the formation of effective and authoritative agents to act on issues of shared concern. While urbanization might be usefully thought to generate objects of political contention, and urbanism and urbanization provide communicative backgrounds that enable objective conditions to emerge as issues of shared concern, there might be much more doubt over whether the claims for justice, rights or redress that are articulated through these urbanized mediums are necessarily directed at urban-scaled sites of authoritative decision-making (Low 2004, Purcell 2006). Whether or not cities do play important roles as effective and authoritative sites of political agency depends on the relationship between the different

processes of extension, reach, embeddedness and situation that I am discussing here.

However, if 'the city' is not always or necessarily an agent of collective will-formation in the ways that some urban theorists want it to be, there are nevertheless at least two important senses in which the urban is currently being reconfigured as a political agent. First, in debates about issues ranging from climate change to obesity, the patterns and rhythms of urban built environments are identified in technocratic-administrative discourses as generating various problems requiring concerted policy interventions. In these debates, people are identified as being detrimentally affected by urban living in ways that escape their own volition or cognition, and that require the reconfiguration of urban infrastructures (e.g. Berlant 2005). At the same time, the aspect of urban politics relating to 'learning to be affected' is increasingly being reconfigured by various anticipatory strategies, such as programmes of urban resilience or discourses of urban ecological security (e.g. Hodson and Marvin 2009, Crang and Graham 2007). In this sort of urban politics, the route of public formation which passes from being affected to recognizing shared interests and then to acting upon this recognition is short-circuited by expert interventions made by 'choice architects' in the name of public health, well-being, public order or happiness, interventions which depend on technologies such as social marketing or urban design. In these fields of policy and governance, urban infrastructures themselves are configured as political agents, in so far as they are designed to affect aggregated patterns of behaviour that will impact on issues of public interest such as health, pollution or finance.

If the 'behaviouralist' problematization of urbanization raises questions about the de-

democratization of the dynamics of affectedness, then various practices of alternative urbanism seek to reconfigure the relations between being affected, affective learning and affecting change in new and creative ways. For example, there is a family of experimental political forms which are configuring 'the urban' as an agent of political transformation beyond narrowly governmental functions in response to paradigmatically 'global' problems. These include initiatives to respond to impending 'peak oil' crises and adopt 'low carbon' practices in the case of the Transition Towns movement (e.g. Seyfang and Smith 2007); to contribute to trade justice campaigns in the case of the Fair Trade Cities movement (e.g. Malpass *et al.* 2007); or to develop alternative cultures of consumption in the case of the Slow Cities movement (e.g. Knox 2005). In all three of these cases, the built form of towns and cities, as material configurations of infrastructures which sustain specific practices, is also identified as a key agent of behaviour change. However, in these cases, this agency is not ascribed only to operations going on in the background of everyday practices, behind people's backs as it were. It is also identified as lying in the potential to configure the everyday spaces of urban life and work as communicative spaces of public education and mobilization. And these sorts of initiatives indicate a style of comparative learning and policy-sharing amongst very 'ordinary' towns and cities. This is a distinctive style of transnational urbanism, in which global issues are addressed locally through enrolment in transnational communities of experimental learning (Clarke 2010).

Conclusions

The guiding premise of this chapter has been that the paradigmatic forms of transnational political agency which concern political theorists and social scientists are made-up of

practices and performances that have complex geographies of local emplacement and spatial reach. In developing premise, this chapter has examined literatures from post-Habermasian critical theories of democracy on the one hand, and from urban studies and critical human geography on the other. In Section I we saw that critical theories of transnational democracy start out from a sense of globalization as a process of spatial extension, and develop a subtle sense of democratic political agency as distributed across diverse contexts. In Section II we saw that the emphasis in these theories on communicative action as the modality through which communities of affected interest are formed as political agents implies that further attention be given to the situated contexts out of which the energies driving the transnationalization of political agency emerge. Section III developed an agenda for investigating the ways in which a great deal of what is described by critical theorists of democracy as transnational political agency actually combines different aspects of urban processes: as objects of grievance, as mediums of coordination, or as effective site of authoritative agency.

In bringing together two fields of political analysis – critical theories of deliberative democracy, and critical urban studies and human geography - around a shared concern with the geographies of affectedness, understood in both fields as a worldly register of claims-making, this chapter has developed an agenda for further research which focuses on three aspects of political agency.

First, in terms of the ‘agents’ who *do* transnational politics, agency is relocated in the distributed actions of movements, organizational fields, and advocacy networks. This

emphasis is related to a strong empirical and normative claim about the communicative steering of contemporary globalization processes.

Second, this sense of distributed agency is related to a reassertion of the importance of attending to the normative energies which shape political agency – of attending to the harms and injustices which animate contentious politics. This reassertion follows from the acknowledgement of the importance of practices of representative claims-making in transnational political agency. The framework developed in Section III helps us see not just that the spatial form of transnational politics connects extended networks with situated contexts, but also that there is often a specific ‘spatial content’ to transnational political contention in so far as it is often animated by ‘felt senses of justice violated’ that emerge from experiences of dispossession or exclusion or from demands for restitution or rights to liveable space.

Third, the chapter has outlined the idea that political agency is enacted through the infrastructures that configure pathways of action (see Bennett 2005), focusing in particular on material and social infrastructures of urban processes. These processes have been described as generating the objects of transnational contention, as mediums for the imagination and coordination of transnational political agency, and as certain forms of political agents in their own right for addressing ‘global’ problems. In this third sense, the dispersal of democratic political agency into flows of communicative action with which this chapter began, having passed through an affective-experiential filter that departs from the strongly rationalist emphasis on agreement found in Habermas’s work, is further

redistributed to include the infrastructures that configure pathways of agency. These infrastructures include the communicative lifeworlds that make possible the practices of situated universalism upon which expanded ethico-political imaginations must depend, and urban infrastructures that configure actions and generate dispersed consequences that may or may not provoke concerted action to address grievances or injustice.

In this chapter, I have outlined an agenda for investigating the multiple forms of agency through which communities of affected interest are assembled and configured. This investigation should take seriously the multiple '*agencement*' of urbanization in transnational political agency (Phillips 2006), where urbanization processes are understood as sources of grievance, where urban ecologies are understood as crucial communicative spaces making possible the affective dispositions upon which a spatially expansive sense of political agency depends culturally and organizationally, and where urban infrastructures are increasingly understood as possessing agentive qualities in their own right in response to various 'global' problems.

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