

Urban Politics: Critical Approaches, Mark Davidson, Deborah Martin (editors), 2014, SAGE, 256 pages, ISBN: 9780857023988, £24.99 (paperback).

Cities are increasingly being seen as inter-connected and inter-constituted. As Davidson and Martin maintain in *Urban Politics: Critical Approaches*, it is the networks, the relations, and the flows - the horizontal geographies - that are important. They provide us with a framing to understand the composition of the urban, and therefore the context of politics. Geography has been privileged with a wealth of urban and political scholarship, and this book pays homage to some key thinkers - Massey, Harvey, Lefebvre, to name a few - whilst adding a contemporary collection of critical research insights to highlight current questions in the field.

By necessarily bracketing the study area 'to produce its objects' (Žižek, 2006) Davidson, Martin and their contributors here create a specific criterion for their own reading, but at the same time open up its interpretation to many new understandings of what could constitute urban politics. It challenges ideas specifically of the site of, and boundedness of, politics through a series of intriguing case studies, to question the types of politics and social change which can be justified from different viewpoints.

The theoretical lineage of *Urban Politics* borrows from classical theory, including urban regime theory and Foucault's birth of modern society, and challenges ideas of Jacques Rancière – the concept of a separation between 'politics' and 'policing' - and Slavoj Žižek's parallax view – making apparent the incongruity of simultaneous dual perceptions. Authors variously offer thought-provoking support for these ideas that assert that either: 'near nothing is without politics' where politics are everywhere; or, that conflict and societal change are implicit in police(d) edict. These reflections feature regularly in the book, connecting relevant theories of democracy, empowerment and order.

The 'bracketing' of urban politics in this book, to bound the contestations that occur in a city space, enable previously mundane and ignored practices to be observed and examined. In this compilation, the city and its politics are no longer considered limited by urban boundaries. The book grapples well with the compatibility of contained space and policy vs. relationality, and concludes with a sidelining of dualisms such as global/local, urban/rural, and social/ecological to allow us to consider the city and its politics in terms of plurality, with legitimate spaces within and between the somewhat arbitrary bounds. This is a theme throughout the book which is particularly effectively conveyed in Chapter 12, referring to the 'metabolism' of the city to 'bely any dualism between cities and nature', opening urban politics to the relational, scalar and comparative.

Bracketing also inevitably frames-out some possibilities of encounter, through subjectivity and abstraction. What is apparent in this book as a consequence of this necessary case study selection, is an unspoken focus on a certain type of city. With a concentration of examples of sites and personalities in developed cities in the global North - Atlanta, Manchester, New York City, London, Sydney, Seattle, Singapore, Nashville, Worcester, Colorado Springs - a perhaps more mundane, majority world inclusive possibility of urban politics is not fully explored. Despite the global relationality of any urban politics, an assumption that urban politics can be represented only by OECD nations' cities (with the exception of Singapore in this list) would be, and has been in historical global policy making, misguided.

Structurally, the book presents the city in three sections: 1) setting, 2) medium, and 3) community. 'Community' is afforded twice the number of chapters of its counterparts, presumably to signify the importance of community and encounter in urban politics. One can speculate that the intention of this is to provide a more in-depth analysis of the site of lived

experience, but the editors' purpose here is unstated.

Readings of Ranciere's work concern the assertion of politics as a rejection of a form of social order. The claim that "politics occurs when one group of people reject their roles within the policed social order, and in doing so they necessarily reallocate roles and make a new police order" (p.82) assumes three things. Firstly, that order did indeed exist in the first instance; secondly, that the only way that politics can occur is with a rejection of existing roles; and thirdly, but related to the first, that 'order' (via more applicable and democratic regulation) cannot be fulfilled in a form of *disorder*. Who is to say that the 'official order' is not chaotic, or more so than that of petty policing? Though one can see the, sometimes inequitable, utility of the city by certain groups of actors in this chapter on the subject of graffiti, the power of mayoralty, and legal planning processes, throughout *Section 2 – City as Medium*, an account for the abovementioned considerations of Ranciere's form of 'antipolitics' could be richer and more pointed.

There appears more purchase in the view that politics are everywhere, offered in other chapters, which enables the creation of societal change through the individual or collective. If the site of politics *is* everywhere, then the following question that the book asks is of central importance: is the profusion of this politics productive? Each chapter provides probing local examples, which are carefully linked to a macro scale, socio-technical or political economy context to draw out the reader's eye. The answer is left to the reader to find.

Despite leaving the reader with a thirst for more diverse examples of urban contexts, and apparent (perhaps inevitable) contradictions in the interpretation of city as setting for urban politics, this important new book is a key read for those interested in the processes that constitute the city and urban life. It is not only for scholars of urban and political studies, but also those less familiar with critical theory. Terms are well defined and in-text boxes provide helpful commentary on historical theses as well as case study details. The use of photographs and diagrams is effective in enlivening the subject matter. It is an accessible text for the urban academic, community activist, citizen, and politician in their various forms. The authors did achieve their goal of "captur[ing] urban politics in its numerous dimensions" (p.11), whilst overlaying the foundation of a critical political framework with real examples to disrupt some of the more traditional ideas of urban theory.

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References

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