

Making Urban Democracy Work

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Reviewed: Mark Purcell, *Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures*, New York, Routledge, 2008.

The central concern of *Recapturing Democracy* is how contemporary urban activists might advocate for and negotiate their visions of alternative citizenship beyond the neoliberal city. This fascinating book builds upon and extends critical Anglophone urban geographers' concerns with the mutually constitutive relationship between society and space. In this tradition, urban space in particular is considered to be materially and symbolically crucial to the shaping of citizenship, activism, ideology, democracy, and political economy. Drawing upon the work of French social theorist Henri Lefebvre, geographers have not only come to understand space as a social product – an *oeuvre*, in Lefebvre's terms – that reflects a specific mode of production and plays a central role in its own production. They have also come to argue, again in Lefebvre's terms, for a “right to the city” where “the city” represents the social relations, resources, and creativity that sustain “a full and dignified life” (94). The right to the city is comprised, more specifically, of: a right to appropriate, be present in, and use urban spaces; a right to participation

within the city through meaningful inclusion in democratic decision-making; and, most crucially for Purcell, a right to *inhabit* the city through access to appropriate resources, services, facilities, jobs, etc. (94-96). His intent is to show examples of how varied urban social movements are currently invoking a right to the city as a catalyst for political action with two common aspects: “a shared opposition to the neoliberal idea of city-as-property” and a shared advocacy “for the city-as-inhabited, for claiming the right to urban space” (106).

In order for Purcell to go into the details of the “right to the city” as a concept, he links it to a particular perspective on power and democracy: the radical pluralism espoused largely by Chantal Mouffe. Following Mouffe, he understands power as constitutive of social relationships and as, therefore, always present in them. Thus, power cannot be laid aside in favor of some form of liberal political consensus (67). Furthermore difference, pluralism, and conflict are the lifeblood of democracy and are to be encouraged, not avoided or “merely tolerated” (63).

It is in this regard that two key concepts – agonism and equivalence – emerge. Agonism is a form of conflict that, unlike antagonism, “refers to groups consciously struggling against each other to gain hegemony, but each recognizes the other’s right to exist” (66). Radical democracy is based on attempts to transform antagonism into agonism rather than to “manage” antagonism and conflict out of existence as deliberative democrats seek to do. Political coalitions cannot, Purcell argues, coalesce around *a priori*, essential, and shared identities and goals, since these similarities would assume some sort of “bracketing” of differences, disagreements, and conflict in favor of consensus. “Rather, their commonality is *produced* through conscious mobilization” (74, his emphasis). The core of this mobilization is the notion of equivalence: groups can be connected to others who may not at first seem to have common interests through “chains” (73) or “networks” (82) of equivalence where one “resolves to act in concert with other movements who occupy an *equivalent* position with respect to the neoliberal hegemony” (74, his emphasis). The point then is not a search for a commonality free from conflict; it is rather to foster an acceptance of difference and conflict in service of a mutually beneficial goal.

Urban activism in Seattle and Los Angeles

In this regard, the city is central to Purcell's argument because he argues that urbanization has been crucial to capitalism, including its contemporary neoliberal manifestation, and resistance to it has also had an "urban character" (89).

The last chapter before the book's conclusion illustrates Purcell's argument. Drawing on research in Seattle and Los Angeles, it describes five cases of urban activism which offer varying degrees of hope for the sorts of alternative urban futures he advocates. In Seattle, there is the case of the gentrification of South Lake Union where any expression of a right to inhabit is meager and tenuous at best as the poor are driven out. Nonetheless, Purcell sees reason for hope in the continued presence of some social service agencies and their clients inhabiting the neighborhood. There is also the re-planning of the city's waterfront transportation system which involved a deliberative form of decision-making that seemed to serve the neoliberal agenda but which was also characterized by a refusal of some planning groups to be co-opted, leaving hope for some form of agonistic engagement, if only among elites. Then there is the case of the Duwamish River Cleanup which is clearly the centerpiece – and perhaps the empirical inspiration – for Purcell's argument. In this longer, more detailed example he describes the political strategies and networks of equivalence that characterized a largely successful citizen movement to shape the cleanup of a formerly industrial stretch of the Duwamish River in the city's core around the agenda of inhabitation.

Two Los Angeles examples follow. The first is the most pessimistic in the book. It shows how homeowners in suburban LA have developed a defensive and exclusionary policy that only sought to preserve the idealized suburban landscape of the affluent, rather than advocating for full and dignified inhabitation for all. The chapter ends with another case of defensive politics among suburban Angelenos. But perhaps improbably, Purcell offers an optimistic appraisal. In this case, a standard neoliberal arrangement – the provision of public funds to offset the risks of private developers who proposed a new sports arena downtown – was defeated by suburban homeowner activism on the grounds that the public expenditure was a "handout" to private interests and that the funds should be spent on services and facilities for inhabitants across the

city instead. While these were the same homeowners, their actions in this case “roundly rejected the neoliberal refrain that economic development eventually benefits all” (167).

Optimism, paradoxes, and tensions

Mark Purcell can see hope in situations where there is very little to be seen. The reactionary conservative homeowner activism he describes in Los Angeles is mean-spirited and tight-fisted in its defense of a mythical suburban ideal. What is currently happening to the long-term residents of South Lake Union in Seattle is not much better. Yet Purcell points out the positive side in that the reactionaries of San Fernando Valley, he tells us, offer insight into workable strategies that, while used defensively and regressively in this case, can be turned to good. Similarly, in South Lake Union, he is able to point out the traces of counter-publics whose inhabitation of the neighborhood still holds out hope for the future.

Two paradoxes temper one’s enthusiasm, however. First, there is the fact that despite all the anti-consensus talk, it turns out that Purcell’s agonistic networks of equivalence operate on the basis of consensus in terms of their internal decision-making and, therefore, following the critique launched by radical pluralists, these networks are by definition exclusionary since every consensus involves exclusion of some opinions or interests. Purcell thinks through the issue to some extent in the book, but I would have been interested in more discussion.

A second strain is the way the Duwamish group’s success was predicated on their willingness to be both inside and outside of the process, choosing to work “in and against the state” – to participate in deliberative decision-making but only after having decided their position through their own process outside of the official procedures. Furthermore, their success was based on their familiarity with and ability to use the techno-speak of the government agencies they were engaged with. While such technologies bring empowerment to some members of activist organizations, it has been argued that they tend to marginalize others with less technological skills¹. Purcell’s case studies provide little insight into these internal dynamics and implications.

¹ S. Elwood, “GIS use in community planning: a multidimensional analysis of empowerment”, *Environment & Planning A*, 34(5), 2002, p. 905-922.

Points for agonistic engagement

These concerns lead to four points that I offer in the spirit of agonistic engagement. First, this book is not about the city or the urban condition. It is about inhabiting space. Yet, Purcell argues that cities are *special* strategic places – an argument with which I sympathize. Yet, how different would the story be if “the urban condition” was avoided completely and was replaced with a right to inhabit space, generally? Many important anti-capitalist social movements have emerged from, or have drawn heavily on the symbolism of the fields and the forest. How might such examples complicate or enhance conceptualizations of alternative futures?

Second, this is a very American book, and its argument is firmly situated in one national context, with its particular development rules, state apparatus, etc. One wonders how its insights might, or might not, travel to other places. Certainly, the concepts will inform other analyses but perhaps a case study from elsewhere might allow ongoing refinement of the concepts?

Third, a major concern I have with the book is how markedly and ironically de-peopled it is. Yes, it is very much about people attempting to change their worlds and it talks a lot about what they do. But the voices are not there. At least, I would have liked to have read about Purcell’s decision not to include many of them, particularly in the light of his argument near the end of the book that more empirical stories are exactly what we need if specific cases of success are to be instructive.

Lastly, the book rests on a binary argument between “neoliberals” and the harbingers of the alternative democratic future. Is this too easy a distinction? Part of what we have learned from the neo-Foucauldian approach to neoliberalism is that it is a regime that produces new subjectivities. Through various metrics and measures, for example, we are inculcated with “competitiveness” (e.g., citation counts and journal impact ratings) and our financial futures are tied to the vagaries of unregulated financial markets. Therefore, would it be too provocative to ask if we are all neoliberals now, or at least partly so? What would that mean for an analysis based on a neoliberal/anti-neoliberal distinction and how does it impact on our hope for an anti-neoliberal future?

My points indicate how interesting and stimulating this book is. It compellingly illustrates struggles for fuller, dignified urban lives while providing sharp insights into the conceptual and political underpinnings of alternative urban futures. It is an excellent addition to our thinking on how democracy and the city might be recaptured.

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