

Clive Barnett (2017) *The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory*. Athens: University of Georgia Press. ISBN 9780820351520.

How do we go about making better cities? Cities that are fairer, more inclusive. Cities built and designed for everyone, not just the most privileged, the most obviously gifted, the elite. Cities that are animated by a sense of justice rather than inequality? That offer shelter and sustenance to each and every person living within them? One answer to these questions - and a good one - is we just get on with it. People see a problem. Mobilise. Argue. Lobby. Protest. Sort things out. In short, get political. Make their neighbourhoods, communities, cities more democratic.

Unfortunately that kind of argument doesn't get us far. The world is more intractable than that. More complicated. Many groups claim to be democratic, to be ruling 'for the people', when they are anything but. Markets are 'democratic', but this is an amoral democracy deaf to those without money. And many don't have the resources, the visibility, the capacity, the recognition, to make claims on others. All this - all these limitations to politics, to democracy - we know from critical social theory and critical social science. And, yet, of course we all hold for the prospect of real, effective, properly democratic politics; what is this journal if it isn't an embodiment of that belief?

So, we all know where the action is at - politics. Or to be more precise 'the political.' The Big Question, however, is when do we know we are studying politics proper, not simply the administration of existing systems of power? There has been something like a consensus, within critical urban studies at least, that to think about politics scholars (and by implication activists) need to wrestle with the proper ontological valency of the political. Radical political philosophers - Badiou, Laclau, Lafort, Mouffe, Nancy, Ranciere, Zizek - tell a story of 'the political' as a distinctive state; a rare rupture when the existing social order opens up to change. Interrogating and drawing out an alternative theoretical narrative to this ontological framing of 'the political' - and its imaginings of democracy and the democratic - is the central purpose of Clive Barnett's *The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory*.

Taking on this consensus around 'the political' is, of course, a huge task. A task made more challenging by Barnett's principled refusal to take the obvious route of questioning the historical or empirical grounding of the theoretical arguments of this consensus. Instead *The Priority of Injustice*, from its introduction to its pithy concluding chapter, unfolds an unbendingly theoretical discussion and analysis of critical theory's relationship to democracy and politics. In many ways this is a master class in working with theory. Read broadly Barnett wants to present his readers with some new tools for

making sense of both politics - and with that democracy - and injustice. But he also wants to make a radical case for the 'ordinariness' of the political; to convince readers that returning 'politics' to the level of 'the ordinary' is not to retreat from the radically transformative potentialities of democracy. Rather it is acknowledge that in a fundamental sense all politics arises out of the rub and flow of ordinary life, and from the language of that life.

This is a mode of argumentation that owes a great deal to the philosopher of everyday language, Stanley Cavall. A student of the British analytical philosopher J L Austin, Cavall is not usually read as a political thinker. Nor is he in any conventional sense a critical theorist. So, there's a delicious audacity to how Barnett ropes him into his argument. Still it is this argument for, and theoretical work around, the ordinary that holds *The Priority of Injustice* together across its three parts. It's the tool that helps the reader understand the limitations of framing 'the political' as a distinct ontological entity (parts 1 and 2, Democracy and Critique, The Ontological Need). It's also the route that allows for the reappraisal of a range of deliberative theorists, writers like Habermas, Benhabib, Young; a reappraisal that suggests original ways such theories can help us understand the relationship between democracy and critique. And, it becomes the clamp that holds open Barnett's pitch in the final third of the book to reorient critical democratic theory towards a focus on how justificatory claims around injustice are made and responded to (in part 3, Phenomenologies of Injustice).

Does the argument stand up? You will need to read the book yourself to decide that. I thought it did; although I spent the whole book wondering why Barnett was so insistent in taking philosophers so seriously, when so many of them refuse to return the favour to social researchers. But in any case, the point about *The Priority of Injustice* isn't to get everything right. It is push its readers to think. To challenge us to think more precisely about commonplace but fundamental terms like critique, democracy, politics. And it certainly does that. Whether it will help us make better, fairer, more just cities, I don't know. We might need to develop some more welcomingly ordinary theory to do that.

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