

Searching for the city in democracy

Extended Book Review of Beveridge, R. and Koch, P. (2023) *How Cities Can Transform Democracy*. Polity.

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Democracy is one of those ideas that's beloved across (most) of the political spectrum, held in almost sacrosanct regard by liberals and conservatives, republicans and communists alike. It's what Erik Swyngedouw (2010), amongst others, has identified as a 'post-political empty signifier', alongside 'sustainability' and 'participation' – hegemonic, vacuous concepts filled by whatever content suits the ideological aims of its advocates. Part of democracy's appeal derives from its ambiguity and flexibility; it means, most simply, rule of the people, with both 'rule' and 'the people' radically open to interpretation.

With the rise to dominance of capitalism and the Westphalian nation, 'rule' came to be associated with liberal-bourgeois notions of sovereignty invested in the state and its institutions of plural separation of powers and popular representation through parties and elected officials; whilst 'the people' came to stand for the citizens of a nation who share in nationhood and participate in its democratic procedures, namely voting in periodic elections. Rule, here, is extremely procedural and contained by the bourgeois abstractions of law and constitutionality; the people an 'imagined community', as Benedict Anderson famously described it, based on the weak ties of invented traditions and manufactured myths of ethnicity and nationality attempting to hold together the impersonal, abstract space of the capitalist state. Recent populist backlashes against such abstract liberal-democratic proceduralism – from Brexit and Trump on the right to Corbynism and Podemos on the left – have invoked the people as a capacious entity standing against a corrupted, technocratic and undemocratic 'elite', the 99% against the 1%.

In their admirably short and punchy book *How Cities Can Transform Democracy*, Ross Beveridge and Philippe Koch take the 99% of left-populism and urbanize it, reconnecting democracy to its radical roots in the demos and the polis – that is, the city and its urban citizenry. The book is written as "an 'intervention': an attempt to shape political ideas, debates and practices" – explicitly "not a work of high theory nor deep empirical research" (page 6) – which makes for a highly readable provocation for those following current debates over the nature of the political and radical democracy in critical

urban studies in particular. Taking as its familiar starting point the hollowed-out, outsourced, disaffected electoral politics of our 'post-political' or 'post-democratic' age, in which liberal elites 'rule the void' (Mair, 2023), the book makes a welcome departure from fashionable Rancièrian renderings of the political as limited to spectacular and heroic collective acts of insurrection and protest against an unjust police order.

On such latter readings, we can only glimpse democracy as an extraordinary, ephemeral event, punctuating long periods of passive dormancy and political domination, and therefore no less enclosed within a temporal straightjacket than it is under electoral parliamentarism. Underpinned by some deep thinking on the 'urban everyday' (Beveridge & Koch, 2019) and 'transformative anti-politics' (Beveridge & Koch, 2021), the authors seek to set democracy free from these exacting schemas – whether liberal-bourgeois representation or radical-revolutionary insurgency – and ground democracy instead in the collective practices and everyday rhythms of urban life, from squats and housing cooperatives to Critical Mass and municipalism. Not so much simply searching for practices of democracy in the city – though it does compile many interesting examples – the book is an intellectually curious and politically inspiring search for the essence of the city in radical democracy.

Wearing its theoretical garb lightly, *How Cities Can Transform Democracy* engages with the 'post-foundational' thought of radical democracy (Marchart, 2007) and situates itself firmly in the 'associative' rather than 'dissociative' strand, in claiming that, despite the void at the heart of power, "there is still the possibility of coming together in the public realm to form a political collective around shared concerns, which, through recurrent practices, can then revive democracy and political life" – as opposed to believing that "democracy can only be realised and rescued through acts confronting the dominant political order" (page 54). While the latter tradition – associated with the agonistic politics of Laclau and Mouffe and the antagonistic politics of Rancièrè – is concerned with deconstruction, dissensus and conflict, the former is a more constructive and pragmatic project, associated with Arendt, of generating new publics and creating new solidarities. Such new publics and solidarities are to be sought in the everyday life of the city. "This is not a democratic politics confined to dissensus and occasional crystallization in 'events', as stylized in so much recent political thought", write Beveridge and Koch, but rather "involves a 'commoning of solidarities', where the resources of urban collective life feed into the making of alliances, marked by trust and caring, talking as well as disagreement, contention and moments of upheaval" (page 123).

Here, much like how John FC Turner (1972) and others see housing and dwelling, democracy is seen as a verb – a lived process and active practice – and not only as a noun, an achieved state or set of institutional objects. In my study of cooperative development and urban commoning in Liverpool

(Thompson, 2020), I found this image really illuminating for understanding how housing, neighbourhoods and the city more broadly are produced and reproduced through unfolding, embodied and performed material practices; and I can see how this verb/noun dialectic animates – or at least resonates with – the thinking of Beveridge and Koch, too, who likewise cite Turner, in their not dissimilar project of understanding how democracy both produces and is the product of the city – or urban dwelling in its widest sense.

Indeed, Beveridge and Koch seem to do for democracy what others have done for property and ownership – seeing it as an active ‘doing’, a social relation, rather than an inert object to be owned or constituted. Just as Nick Blomley (2004) has ‘unsettled the city’ in the way it is constructed through regimes of ownership and property rights, Beveridge and Koch here perform a parallel act for democracy: unsettling the dominant state-centred paradigm of liberal-representative politics and settling instead on the more modest yet equally radical notion of active, dynamic, emergent and distinctly *urban* forms of democracy. What exactly an ‘urban’ form of democracy amounts to is one of the abiding questions of the book.

Beveridge and Koch seek to decentre our understanding of democracy from formal and abstract rights of entitlement underwritten by the nation-state and foreground instead the diverse informal and concrete rights that are claimed and performed through embodied action in the appropriation and management of shared urban spaces and infrastructures. Just as the deeply political, contentious and conflictual rights claims of ownership and citizenship alike are ‘settled’ and authorised by the clear-cut legibility of law and spatio-legal boundaries and borders backed by the ultimate authority of the state (Blomley, 2004), so too are the unruly and spontaneous democratic energies of the demos channelled into, and contained by, the constituted, procedural, ordered and legible form of the nation-state and its liberal-democratic institutions of national political parties and majoritarian voting in periodic elections. Instead, democracy is here envisioned as both product and producer of the city; the city envisioned as a distinct political “‘category of practice’ instead of a category of analysis” (page 10) existing as part of, yet also opposed to, the state. Drawing on theorists such as James C Scott and Warren Magnussen, they seek to ‘see democracy like a city’ rather than like a state. What might this look like?

Mobilising Sheldon Wolin’s theory of ‘fugitive democracy’ and Engin Isin’s conception of the city as both actual space and virtual idea, Beveridge and Koch argue that urban democracy isn’t given in advance, but rather continually activated, claimed and conjured into being by neighbours and strangers coming together around shared material interests in urban spaces and infrastructure, from housing to mobility. Through this process, what Beveridge and Koch call ‘new urban publics’ are

called forth to manage such resources through what amounts to acts of commoning, and which in turn constitute and reconstitute democratic practices through experimentation and participation in micro-sovereignties – urbanization as “generative of an emergent political order” (page 46).

Nonetheless, Beveridge and Koch steer clear of engaging in the problematic debates around diversifying the concept of (state) sovereignty as multiple (territorial or sectoral) sovereignties – from food sovereignties to land sovereignties – preferring the language of ‘non-sovereign’ urban publics to that of diverse micro-sovereignties. They thus take seriously the idea of sovereignty as bound up with the state as a singular societal logic, in contradistinction to the market and civil society. Their refreshing study of democracy locates it in an urban civil society set against – though always within – the sovereign state.

Being in and against – and beyond – the state aligns very closely with the new municipalism, a movement that Beveridge and Koch feature centrally in their analysis. If there’s a normative hypothesis behind the book – and I think there is – it’s that the city remains the ideal space for citizens to come together to form new urban publics as a radically democratic polity or *civitas*. Municipalism posits a similar hypothesis – that the urban provides the ‘strategic entry point’ for democratic societal transformation through a ‘politicising of proximity’ (Roth et al., 2023). The urban is seen as providing the socio-spatial proximities between otherwise intersectionally-stratified strangers that are necessary for realising the ends of municipalism and radical democracy alike – that is, building a self-organised form of life beyond the compulsions of the capitalist market and the dominations of the colonial nation-state.

“One of the main overarching arguments of this book”, write the authors, “is that a conceptual and normative disentangling of, first politics and, then, democracy from the state is required if we are to realize the project of the city” (page 127). “These two logics”, they write, “are built on completely different understandings of politics and democracy”. In the state-centric view, these are “bounded by a given set of rules and institutions which help to contain them”, whereas in the city-shaped frame, “democracy and politics are defined by their immanent capacity to forge new ways of organizing and alternative modes of self-rule, where the self is never bounded and fixed” (page 112). Whilst they describe this polarity as a “field of tension” it seems the book focuses squarely on the latter sense of democracy as a verb, as an open-ended process of becoming, and less obviously on the former sense of it as a noun, as an institutionalised state; or, in their words, “as distinct practices rather than any institutional form” (page 158). Does this run the risk of occluding form in this dialectic? This is a question I return to below.

Drawing on Margaret Kohn's formulation of the 'democracy/state nexus' (Kohn, 2016), alongside Simon Critchley's notion of the necessary 'interstitial distance' between democracy and the state, Beveridge and Koch wrestle with this contradictory relationship and conclude that any democracy must simultaneously exist within the state and yet be kept at a distance from its bureaucratic control: a paradoxical "embrace of the need for apartness and acceptance of its ultimate impossibility" (page 128). Four case studies exemplifying four different tendencies within the new municipalist movement – the Preston model, Cooperation Jackson, Barcelona en Comú, and Naples – are then explored to illustrate varying 'interstitial distances' to the state and their implications for urban democracy. This sets the stage for thinking through – in fruitful conversation with the work of Davina Cooper and fellow travellers (Cooper et al., 2019) – the open diversity of 'stateness' and prefigurative possibilities of reimagining the state beyond its current patriarchal-colonial-capitalist configuration, including "guerrilla, micro, city, regional and global states" (page 131). "Being imaginative", they muse, "we might add to this list the 'urban state', one that engages in a non-sovereign politics and advances collective self-rule".

But we're left here with only a tantalising glimpse of the kinds of urban democratic institutions they have in mind. We're left to assemble for ourselves out of the myriad examples presented what such an 'urban state' might amount to. Is the urban state to be composed of parties and elected representatives, or assemblies and recallable delegates, cooperatives and deliberating members, councils and unions, formalised NGOs and informal associations, or a combination of all of these and more? What organizational forms might make up this 'urban state', beyond the state as we know it?

Essentially, where does all this leave democracy understood as rule of the people? Which people? And what kind of rule? Rule of the people, for Beveridge and Koch, is a continuously produced, highly active and participatory process of constant creation, negotiation, and recreation in the here and now amongst throwntogether groups of urban inhabitants – one that shares many affinities with 'commoning' as a counterhegemonic method of organising provisioning (or in this case politics) through collective interaction, cooperation and self-organisation, as "lasting encounters in the common" (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 350). The people, then, simply signifies anyone and everyone who participates in this (re)production of urban life – which begs the questions of how this urban multitude gets assembled, of who gets included and who gets excluded, and how social class – and class conflict – runs through all this?

There's an implicit affinity, I'd suggest, between 'democratic urban publics' and Hardt and Negri's (2009) 'multitude'. Each are historical subjects that seem to emerge organically and cohere spontaneously through the connections and relations created, respectively, by the city or by cognitive

capitalism. This is the anti-political, left-populist politics of the urban crowd, or of 'everybuddy' (Merrifield, 2011). But is this spatialised, urban multitude a class-in-itself? What is its class composition? How are divergent material interests bridged between those classes that compose the urban multitude – namely the proletariat, the lumpen proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie and, also, the professional-managerial class?

Such questions of class composition – and conflict – are almost entirely absent from the analysis, but Beveridge and Koch hint at answers in various places. Urbanization is claimed to have a "history of turning apparently insignificant individual fates into problems of public concern" (page 97). The city thus does the work of connecting individuals to the collective, of providing the socio-material conditions for creating new urban publics. The city itself is the conduit for political composition, for transforming a latent urban multitude from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself. This presents the exciting prospect of cutting across intersectional class divides and polarisations to bring people together across difference based on their shared urban relation to material resources and spaces.

But this raises the important strategic question of political organization – how to organize class coalitions for hegemonic struggle, and whether to organize through more 'vertical' forms of the party and formal leadership, as the left mostly did for much of the twentieth century, or through the more 'horizontal' forms of the leaderless movement, to which the left increasingly turned in the early twenty-first century (Nunes, 2021). Beveridge and Koch seem to be searching for a form of urban democracy that's indeed 'neither vertical nor horizontal' (Nunes, 2021) but nonetheless appears more comfortable with the horizontalism of Occupy and Critical Mass than the verticalism of state institutions or political parties.

In their later works *Commonwealth* and *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri are concerned with understanding how, as Peter D Thomas (2023: 206) has recently rendered it, "the practice of assembling, or of democratic convergences and encounters" amongst the multitude might be articulated in organizational form as "transformative coalitions of singularities with a material consistency in nonrepresentative and non-sovereign institutions structured by forms of delegacy and revocation". Municipalism is a notable recent movement that has experimented with such forms – especially with revocable delegates in assemblies (van Outryve d'Ydewalle, 2019) – which amount to an experimental reimagining of the party-form rather than a rejection of it. Following Thomas's (2023: 207) reading of contemporary radical politics through the lens of Gramsci, the party-form is a "dynamic process of political composition rather than mere apparatus of command", neither vertical nor horizontal. Just as urban democracy cannot escape the state, nor can it escape the party-form, which should be understood as the essential question of organization. It's precisely this question of political

organization through the party-form that any material practice of radical democracy needs to consider if it is to successfully challenge the liberal-bourgeois state-centric form of democracy.

Beveridge and Koch's 'urban democratic publics' bear comparison to Cain Shelley's (2022) recent conceptualisation of 'democratic municipalist agents' as a distinct new category of political organizational agent concerned with social justice – in addition to the more familiar national political party and trade union, as well as social movement. The specific organizational form(s) taken by democratic municipalist agents are likewise lacking definition, though Shelley (2022) connects this to Murray Bookchin's theorisation of a distinctive kind of urban citizenship cultivated in specifically urban institutions, notably the assembly. Bookchin's thinking on the city and the democratic urban assembly is a remarkable omission from *How Cities Can Transform Democracy*. Nor is there any real engagement with the idea of the urban commune – the striking influence of the 1871 Paris Commune on contemporary municipalism, for instance. This seems like a missed opportunity to ground the analysis in the theory and history of radical-revolutionary urbanisms.

This absence may be explicable by the attempt to move beyond essentialist and idealist urban imaginaries of the agora and the commune, as rooted in some anachronistic and problematic Athenian democracy, and situate the argument instead in contemporary forms of planetary urbanisation, which have exploded the city. Indeed, at the outset it's noted that "The 'city', understood as a distinct spatial form, social configuration or 'authentic arena of political life', to borrow Murray Bookchin's term" – the only time he's cited – "offers us little hope in a context in which cities are blurring into variegated urban-social forms, suburbanized, regionalized, even 'rurbanized'" (page 5).

So, on the one hand we have the book's "point of departure" as the "process driving the spatial, economic, and political transformations of contemporary societies – urbanization" (pages 5-6); as democracy's "entanglement with urban places and materialities" (page 158). And on the other we have 'the city' presented *not* as a topographical space or jurisdictional scale – or as the diverse spaces of planetary urbanisation – but rather as an idea and imaginary animating urban practices, as a category of practice instead of analysis, "as a foundation for political imagination and action" and "political horizon" (page 46). These two vantage points sit rather uneasily next to each other. Whilst the latter opens up new vistas onto the urban nature of democracy, by the same token it occludes from view the changing material nature of planetary urbanisation.

The very same questions that hover over conceptualisations of radical municipalism also loom large in this study of radical urban democracy. What is the distinctive nature of the city or the urban in creating conditions for municipalism or democracy? Does this have something to do with qualitative

notions of 'city life' or 'urbanity' – as Beveridge and Koch invoke at various points, as “the being together of strangers”, quoting Iris Marion Young (page 162) – or is it more of a quantitative question of sheer density or proximity of socio-spatial relations, and therefore also observable in more rural spaces? Recent work on radical municipalism stops short of identifying something distinct about urbanity and insists municipalism is just as much at home in rural villages and small towns as in the metropole (Roth et al., 2023). Can the same be said of urban democracy?

A related question is about centrality and its opposing referent, peripherality. Do radical municipalism and democracy each depend on centrality – on the centripetal concentration of citizens and their energies in spaces that might function as hubs or centres for various kinds of activities or infrastructures – or can they operate in more peripheral settings, along transit lines or logistical conduits, for instance, or at the forgotten edges of metropolitan agglomerations?

Moreover, what is it about the city – what distinctly urban institutions – sets this notion of urban democracy apart from other horizontalist and de-centred accounts of democracy? What conceptual work is 'the city' doing beyond that already undertaken by commoning and encounter? What's the enigmatic quality of the urban that's never quite revealed in explicit terms?

My hunch is that radical municipalism and urban democracy, despite internal diversity, are each drawn towards the centre of urban spaces and tend to invoke and channel a romantic imaginary of urbanity as human encounter – for a 'politics of the encounter', as Andy Merrifield (2013) might liken it, or a 'politics of proximity' as Bertie Russell has described municipalism (Russell, 2019). Each is implicitly inspired by Lefebvre's 'revolutionary romanticism' and his deeply poetic understanding of the city as humanity's greatest work of art created by its inhabitants – who therefore have a Right to the City – and whose romantic promise, through politicising urban proximity and encounter, lies in the “the intensification and broadening of life” (Lefebvre, quoted in Wilson, 2013: 372).

Is this a fair characterisation of Beveridge and Koch's notion of urban democracy? On the one hand, they do seem to emphasise the importance of embodied human encounter, not only between individuals but so too with the material resources and the built environment that constitute the city. The different experiments with urban self-government detailed in the chapter on 'Self-governing Urbanization' – centred on the home and housing development and tasked with building urban democratic publics – are said to “articulate in different ways an immediate bodily relation to the built environment. Only when this happens, it seems, can the forces of urbanization be brought into reach for urban citizens and collectives” (page 97).

On the other hand, such immediate bodily relation need not be limited to 'the city' as such but could occur in any context where inhabitants interact with provisioning systems for their collective survival. Indeed, there's a sense in which this radical conceptualisation of democracy as material practice could be articulated more simply in the language of provisioning systems or infrastructures – possessing a more universal and less normative quality than urbanity. Why see democracy like a city, when we can see democracy like a settlement or indeed a system?

This is the move made by a collective of scholars associated with foundational economy thinking, whose recent work on *The Spatial Contract: A New Politics of Provision for an Urbanized Planet* (Schafran et al., 2020) treads similar ground to, and can be read fruitfully alongside, *How Cities Can Transform Democracy*. The central argument runs something like this: We're all connected to each other through a shared material interest in the successful operation and governance of the 'collective reliance systems' that make human life possible and worthwhile – from food, water and transport to housing, care and education – and which therefore present the possibility of a 'spatial contract' – rather than social contract – for renewing democratic politics and citizenship.

Here, the focus is shifted from the political imaginary of the city – and the implicit centrality of the Right to the City – towards the hub-and-spoke sociotechnical systems of provisioning that structure any kind of human settlement. Rather than 'seeing democracy like a city', this perspective implores us to see it like a settlement and a system. Reading both books together raises the question of what the city adds to our understanding of politics, democracy and citizenship over and above that provided by the notion of the settlement and the system. On this basis, might *How Cities Can Transform Democracy* have fallen into the trap of 'methodological cityism' (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015), just as municipalism might risk the 'local trap' (Russell, 2019)?

How Cities Can Transform Democracy is haunted by what Brenner and Katsikis (2020: 24) describes as the 'hinterland question' of planetary urbanisation – what to make of those 'operational landscapes' that feed and fuel cities, including the "industrial, agrarian, extractive, energetic, logistical" spaces, infrastructures and networks that increasingly traverse "ecologies (terrestrial, oceanic, subterranean, atmospheric)". How might urban democracy work – and new democratic urban publics organize themselves – when stretched out along pipelines, supply chains and infrastructural corridors? Or, indeed, at the termini or frontier zones of extractive commodity value chains that constitute planetary urbanization's 'planetary mine' (Arboleda, 2020)?

Hinterlands also include more inhabited spaces of human settlement beyond the urban cores of global cities – spaces that tend to host the infrastructure, and house the workers, that make collective reliance systems work for urban cores. In *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict*, Phil

A Neel (2018: 17-18) breaks down this background geography of the city into the 'near' and 'far' hinterland – the far hinterland describes “traditionally ‘rural’ [...] space for disaster industries [...] and large-scale industrial extraction, production and initial processing of primary products” and also including “large urban zones of collapse”, such as Rust Belt inner cities; whilst the 'near hinterland' “encompasses the foothills descending from the summit of the megacity,” including suburbs, exurbs and slums. Neel’s study of America’s hinterlands reveals a stark polarisation between the kinds of politics emerging in rural and logistical spaces – increasingly reactionary and populist, sometimes neo-fascist, and driven by the old and ‘new petty bourgeoisie’ (Evans, 2023) – and those emerging in the glittering coastal hubs where the ‘creative class’ cluster and a very different progressive urban politics of occupation and municipalism materialises (Neel, 2018). What would a class analysis of the spaces of planetary urbanisation – increasingly polarised between privileged global cities and their subaltern hinterlands – mean for an urbanized conception of democracy? What would it take for urban democratic publics to emerge in the farms, mines, warehouses and ports that support urban centres? These are the kinds of intriguing questions provoked by *How Cities Can Transform Democracy*, which pushes critical urban studies to take a generative and imaginative leap in its understanding of the evolving connections between urbanization and democracy.

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