



Beveridge, R., and Koch, P. (2016) The post-political trap: reflections on politics, agency and the city. *Urban Studies*,
(doi: [10.1177/0042098016671477](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016671477))

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Deposited on: 16 November 2016

The post-political trap? Reflections on politics, agency and the city.

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Pre-proof version, accepted for publication in Urban Studies 2016

Abstract

This debates piece reflects on the influence of the post-political critique on urban studies. In this literature (e.g. Swyngedouw 2014) the default position of contemporary democracies is post-politics – the truly political is only rare, random and radical. The ‘post-political trap’, refers to the intuitively convincing, yet ultimately confining account it provides of contemporary urban governance. We identify three shortcomings. First, the binary understanding of the real political/politics as police negates the in-betweenness and contingency of actual existing urban politics. By so doing, secondly, political agency is reduced to the heroic and anti-heroic. Thus, the plurality of political agency in the urban sphere and multi-faceted forms of power lose their political quality. Third, the perceived omnipotence of the post-political order actually diminishes the possibilities of the urban as a political space of resistance and emancipation. On these grounds we argue not for a rejection of the notion of the post-political per se but a more differentiated approach, one more alert to the contingencies of the political and depoliticization in the urban realm.

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The post-political trap?

Imagine a largely homogeneous city centre with few meaningful public spaces, a business district populated with two or three skyscrapers belonging to multi-nationals of medium global and high local importance, suburbs comprising the odd gated community nestled in between sprawling high-rise estates. In this city, politics is rarely seen or even thinkable. The town hall may still be populated by politicians and civil servants but they operate in the thin wedge of local autonomy, squashed by the global level.

Suddenly, however, something changes - call centre workers take to the street demanding an end to low wages provided by one of the multi-nationals. A union is involved. An urban social movement develops and the strike threatens to spread to other groups of workers. In the course of the protest, police deny them access to the street outside the multi-national's office on the grounds that it is the company's property. The campaign continues, goals remain local but have a universal ring (fair working wage, etc.). Pressure is exerted on local politicians who respond by stressing that there is nothing they can do as wages are generally regulated by national legislation and the company is not breaking the law. The company itself responds to the strikes by threatening to move aspects of its operations – and many jobs – elsewhere.

This fictional episode in urban politics contains a few clichés, but these harbour depressing truths. Privatization of urban space is increasing, the horizons of urban politics appear stunted, the scope for urban activism squashed by the power of global capital. On these grounds, one can quite easily understand the appeal of the post-political city thesis as propagated by Swyngedouw (e.g. 2007; 2009; 2011; 2014) (following in particular Rancière, Zizek and Badiou). His post-political city is largely devoid of politics, enervated, subject to the whims of global economic forces, governed through managerial consensus-driven political systems. But would we, still following Swyngedouw, want to dismiss the workers campaign for better wages, the union supporting them and the social movement which arises as not really being “political”? Indeed, would we, as urban researchers, argue that such agency corrupts the urban “political” and impedes the flourishing of urban democracy? And if we did, what would be the consequences for our understanding of urban governance?

This piece argues that while the post-political city thesis has a broad-brush potency, it is important to know and fully consider the implications of this perspective on urban politics. To do this, we provide a three part critique of the post-political thesis. First, we highlight problems with the ontological claims about politics made by Rancière and others, arguing that the binary conception of the political/ politics as police order is too narrow a basis to capture the contingencies of actually existing urban politics. Second, the constricted but universalised understanding of the political/ politics reduces the realm of political action, denying the plurality of political agency apparent in the urban sphere. Third, we show that Swyngedouw's assertion that urban politics is experiencing a post-political historical condition, suggests an omnipresent and omnipotent order. As well as lacking an empirical basis, such claims arguably diminish the possibilities of the urban as a political space of resistance and emancipation – the very features which provide the foundation to counter post-politics in the city. Ultimately, the ‘post-political trap’, refers to the compelling, yet ultimately confining account it provides critically-minded researchers of contemporary urban politics. We conclude the piece by proposing ways of re-aligning the field of enquiry. In particular we argue not for a rejection of the post-political perspective but a more plural

understanding of politics and depoliticisation, one that better accounts for contingency and the continuing multiplicity of political agency in cities. There is a need, we conclude, for a more fundamental discussion about urban politics per se (what it is, what we would like it to be), and not just in relation to the post-political thesis itself. (It is here where we consider the post-political thesis as productive because it questions the seemingly self-evident political character of the urban realm.)

The post-political thesis

Notions such as the 'post-democratic' (Crouch 2004), 'post-politics' (Mouffe 2005), 'post-political' (Rancière 2009) speak of a contemporary democratic condition in which genuine contestation and conflicting claims about the world are not apparent. Such theorizing rests on the understanding that the post-cold war period has witnessed a new political and economic settlement centered on the norms and interests of the global market, and an intellectual climate and governance structures in which a fetish for consensus has foreclosed proper political debate (Žižek 2008). The general thrust of this post-politics, post-political literature is that the political realm has been hollowed out or that the political itself has disappeared (e.g. Rancière 2003; Mouffe 2005; Žižek 2008), that the parameters of political discussion and political action have narrowed to preclude alternatives to neoliberalism (e.g. Crouch 2004). Political apathy, citizen cynicism and (economic) elite control behind the façade of formal democratic political systems, are central concerns as is the commensurate rise in populism and political protest around the world.

These arguments have been translated by Swyngedouw (e.g. 2007; 2009) into thinking on cities. He observes an urban politics reduced to consensus, excavated of the truly political, constructed through empty signifiers like the 'global city' or the 'creative city'. All that is left in this (formerly) political realm is the management and policing/ policy-making of the consensus (Swyngedouw 2010). It is one in which political decision making is virtually pre-ordained: led by global public-private administrative elites, where the outcomes of policy-making – what is possible, desirable and who should be included and excluded – are virtually known in advance (Swyngedouw 2007). Consequently, truly political action finds – exasperated – expression in urban political violence from the margins.

Swyngedouw has certainly succeeded in transforming the debate on urban politics (see Macleod 2011). His work should be praised for prompting dispute, bringing a new edge to critical thinking on 'governance', provoking us to re-think the city *politically*, to consider afresh the nature and scope of contemporary urban politics, as well as the possibilities and means for achieving change.

But is he entirely right? If he is, the normative implications are devastating not only for urban politics but, given the political and economic significance of cities, for national democratic systems in their entirety. Through the post-political lens institutional cornerstones securing the legitimacy of contemporary politics are nothing but a charade to obscure the hidden interests benefiting from and guiding policies, while radical and reformist efforts made within established institutions will always be ineffective and, even worse, only serve to further embed the post-political order.

Something of a lament for the demise of the socialist alternative, the post-political narrative is steered by leftist political persuasions, but even for those who share these sympathies there are problems. The thesis that urban politics is monolithically post-political, post-democratic or

depoliticized has, correctly, been challenged (e.g. MacLeod and Jones, 2011, footnote 19; McCarthy 2013; Darling 2014; Lerner 2014). In what follows, our arguments are not novel; but we believe they taken together contribute to a more considered understanding of a notion (the post-political or post-democratic city) that is increasingly used, almost as short-hand, to describe the ills of contemporary urban governance.

More than meets the (post-political) eye: a three part critique

The strength of an academic concept lies largely in its focus and its ability to encapsulate concerns shared by a diverse set of academics. The post-political thesis certainly fulfils these conditions. For empirical research it is helpful because it opens a window to power in urban politics. From this perspective, urban politics might be distorted not only because the interest of powerful agencies are systemically privileged over those from deprived groups but because some conflicts never occur and some ideas and actors are systematically foreclosed. However, we argue there is a problematic understanding of the relation between the 'political', processes of depoliticization and the empirical effects of depoliticization.

The purity of the "political" - reducing actually existing urban politics to police order

For all the potency of the post-political city thesis, it suffers from the understanding that the truly political exists only in moments, and that post-politics is the default position of contemporary democracy (Swyngedouw 2014, 175-177; Swyngedouw 2011). This stark, binary view relies most heavily on Rancière's thinking, who insisted "on the impossibility of the institutionalization of democracy and, consequently, on the abyss between any instituted order (the police) and the democratic presumption of equality (the political)" (Swyngedouw 2011, 376). As Swyngedouw (2007, 605) points out "Rancière's political philosophical mission...is to re-centre the 'political' as distinct from 'policy' (what he calls 'the police')". Synonymising actually existing politics with the police was of course a deliberately political move by Rancière, one designed to deny contemporary political systems the very essence of their claims – to provide for the political and ensure democracy.

Following Rancière writers employing the post-political label generally understand true political actions in terms of gestures, interventions and polemic scenes (as practiced by the Spanish *Indignados* and the Occupy movement, amongst others). Here, the political is an *antagonistic* moment that questions or challenges existing orders, ways of doing things, enshrined spatialities and normalized social relations; it "disrupts the established order of things" (Dikeç, 2012, 674) and provides new political imaginaries enabling public contestation and deliberation. In this view, the political emerges rather than having a proper place; the political moment is spontaneous and pure (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014; cf. Mouffe 2014) and challenges the boundaries between 'the political' and 'the apolitical'. As a consequence, the political is short-lived and by implication cannot be long-term, institutionalised or gradual – the political act is the backroom door being knocked down, undermining the politics ongoing behind. The political is not articulated through elections or other processes of "actually existing instituted (post-) democracy" (Swyngedouw 2014, 171). The political can only ever be apart from the state and political system and hence is not to be found in parliament or meeting rooms but on the street or square.

This conception implies a sharp division between a true and pure moment ("the political") on the one hand and blurred and affirmative forms of actions ("politics") on the other. This binary conception insinuates that the political is "truly" political only in the sense that it might subvert

the existing order of things and the established hierarchies of power. By definition, only the discrete and scarce political has the potency to effect real change. In this view politics per se is not political and is even the mobilisation of the apparatuses of the political system against the emergence of the political (Swyngedouw 2014, 170-1). Subjects, actions and ideas are not political unless they fulfil the ideal of the democratic articulation of claims.

The problem with this perspective is twofold. First, it often remains unclear if statements are made on ontological or ontic grounds (Marchardt 2011 following Heidegger). Second, the empirical consequences of adopting these positions are problematic.

The post-foundational theorists (e.g. Rancière, Mouffe, Badiou, etc.), from whom Swyngedouw draws his inspiration, share the common idea of *the* political difference (Marchardt 2011) that differentiates between the political as the constitutive element of our social world and politics as everyday, real-world conflicts addressing those social relations³. The political can, then, be perceived as an ontological category whilst politics (or police order) is an ontic actualisation of the political. Both terms operate, hence, on different analytical levels. They do not delimit different terrains on the same map. Rather the political defines the cartographic principles of the map while politics delimits the areas of conflict on the map. They do touch, however. Obviously the political shapes the conflicts that may or may not come into focus and, in reverse, politics, the phenomenal world of political action, influences the way we build our fundamental sense of the social world. Important as the political difference is in post-politics studies, the analytical implications of the political difference are not always carefully considered (Marchardt 2011).

If the political and politics do not belong to the same analytical register, it is impossible empirically as well as normatively to judge or evaluate the radical or emancipatory quality of actually-existing politics by comparing it to philosophical arguments about a distinct definition of the political as an ontological category. If you do so, politics is always disappointing and deficient. Presumably, this is also the reason why there are so few empirical studies investigating the political quality or character of political actions or the historical genesis of the alleged post-political order. If Grand Politics is not from this world and everything else is already tainted by post-politics there is, in effect, nothing left to study. Hence, the notion of the post-political trap – once enticed in, there is nowhere else for argumentation to go.

Yet, in real world, there appear to be a lot of actors who have an interest in challenging the existing order of things and some of those engage with or work within the so-called police order. To say this is not to reject outright Rancière's understanding of the political but rather to insist that his claim is an ontological rather than an empirical one (resting on the need for and way in which revolutionary change occurs,) and that other ontologies of the political shed a different light on what politics might be. For example, we might follow those scholars who have focused on the *associative* dimension constituting the political, with the work of Hannah Arendt (1958) being emblematic here. According to Arendt, people create a political domain by acting and speaking in plurality in the presence of others and thus creating a space of appearance. By and through the political, people are liberated from their private identities and appear as public subjects. Intersubjectivity and the associative power of the political are keys to this understanding. The actors who actually create this space of appearance

³ On differences and similarities between these writers, see Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014; cf. Marchardt 2011.

represent a segment of the population or the public without formally being mandated to do so. They are not elected, but they act in the name of a large collectivity or social group. They signify a particular public in the sense of *darstellen*; even though they do not represent (*vertreten*) this public (see Kohn 2013). The creation or staging of a collectivity unrepresented before is, from this perspective, a genuine political act. It opens up new opportunities for distinct, even emancipatory forms of subjectivations.

There is a link here to the emerging literature on mobilizing concepts of representation. Disch (2011, 104) argues, for instance, that “it is only through representation that a people comes to be seen as a political agent, one capable of putting forward a demand.” The associative perspective on the political emphasizes the performative effect of collective action. Long-term, backbreaking work within political institutions can make a difference to some citizens.

Hence, the binary understanding of the political vs. politics as police order can and should be problematized with regard to the analytical level it speaks to, the ontological or the ontic. Instead of just deducing an historical condition we seem to live in from reflections on the ontological foundations of politics, we argue that urban post-politics or depoliticisation is an empirical puzzle and should be treated accordingly.

Shrinking political agency - true politics and political agency can only be rare and random

However, from its ontological foundations, the second constrictive element of the post-political trap becomes apparent: the conceptual understanding of political actions. The post-politics perspective does not deny the continuing contingencies and contestations of power relations (e.g. Swyngedouw 2014, 168-170) but rather casts political agency solely as a revolutionary act (Darling 2014, 74-75). Hence it portrays genuinely political agency - like the genuinely political itself - as inherently in opposition to agencies within actually existing politics/ the police order. Politics is seen as populated by managerial nobodies, encased in the apparatuses of market-oriented, state-enforced consensus. In short, there is not much of a spectrum of political agency. Indeed, the realm of possibilities, the potentialities and plurality of agency are reduced to the heroic (the “liberalitarians”), anti-heroic (the amorphous post-political subjects⁴) and demagogic (the populists profiting from the lack of politics). The mundane, the small, the gradual, the reformist and conservative lose their political import – they are post-political, their agencies intrinsically part of the reification of the post-political apparatus.

According to this view, even radical urban activism in the register of “politics” (i.e. concerned with concrete social-spatial interventions) reproduces rather than undermines the post-political condition:

“Such expressions of protest that are framed fully within the existing police order are, in the current post-politicising arrangement, already fully acknowledged and accounted for. (...) They are positively invited as expressions of the proper functioning of ‘democracy’, and become instituted through public-private stakeholder participatory forms of governance, succumbing to the tyranny of ‘participation’” (Swyngedouw 2014, 177).

⁴ The figures populating the cover of *The Post-Political and Its Discontents* (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014) might be illustrative here.

Presumably, then, Swyngedouw would dismiss the call centre workers campaigning for better wages in our fictionalised account as not acting in a truly political way. As he states, “the political is not about expressing demands to the elites to rectify inequalities or unfreedoms” (Swyngedouw 2014, 174). True political agency does not engage with political systems, the existing police order. Rather, like some of the Occupy movements, it confronts them by denying them, by ignoring their conventions. In his most recent work on urban post-politics, Swyngedouw (2014) spends some time dismissing the interventions of contemporary urban activists, who engage in the “micro-politics of local urban struggles” against environmental pollution, for example (176). Ultimately, their actions are seen to elevate the social and the particular to the political realm and thereby impinge upon its true emancipatory potential (ibid.).

This has potent normative and theoretical implications. The conception of a pure, grand and true political leads to the idealization of radical interventions not only from grassroots leftist movements but potentially from all political strands. Furthermore, if there is nothing left apart from the radical gesture what moral, political and strategic options remain open to actors? Mouffe (2013) takes issue with those radical scholars (and activists) who propose a withdrawal from all existing institutions, a rejection of representation and the goal of establishing majorities. She argues that this avoids the realities of political power, which is always territorialised (i.e. it emerges within concrete settings). Strategies⁵ to overcome forms of hegemony must engage with visible nodes of power, which ultimately are apparent in existing institutions of politics (and the police). If not, radical politics denies its political potential and reproduces the very post-political condition it wants to attack – by not directly engaging with the institutions of power through which it operates.

But it is precisely this form of “urban insurgency” that Swyngedouw (2014, 174) privileges as political, as having the potential to get us out of the post-political quagmire. Hence it is to the staged and symbolic actions of many of the Occupy movements of 2011 and the Spanish *Indignados* who we should turn to research the genuinely political and radical in urban governance. Regardless of the merits of these forms of agency, this is an extremely narrow conceptualization of political agency. And it is one that allows us little hope of breaking free from the post-political condition, precisely because it is so specific in its conditions and hence seldom in its occurrence. While a legitimate argument could be made that genuinely radical political acts do occur so rarely, it is more problematic to equate them – and only them - with the political. As a consequence, and this is the second element of the trap, a post-political perspective on the city entails viewing the agencies of many – if not the overwhelming majority of – political movements, organisations and agencies that operate on the local scale as not being political because they employ different strategies to resist oppression.

Omnipresent and omnipotent – the post-political condition

Allied to this narrow conception of the political and political agency is a heavily structuralist account of the post-political arrangements which deny the political. Swyngedouw arguments about contemporary urban conditions can only hold through the presumption of omnipresent and omnipotent structures. Herein lies the third element of the trap – the post-political city is a theoretical point of reference rather than an analytical conclusion on the basis of detailed and coherent empirical observations. The post-political condition is too often presupposed as

⁵ Conceived as a ‘war of position’, following Gramsci.

a matter of fact rather than interrogated as a matter of concern (Larner 2014, 192)⁶. It might be argued that for the thesis to truly hold, the condition has to be presupposed. As stated above, if we depart from the assumption that politics is fundamentally anti-political and we are experiencing a post-political age, it is easier to explain away the disappointments and deficiencies we inevitably come across (they are the result of the truly political to emerge). The actual operations of the post-political, along with a vast range of political agencies fall outside of the theoretical lens, are not accounted for in the thesis.

Hence, this is, then, a field of urban research dominated by theoretical assertions, lacking in empirical research - a sense of actually existing post-politics. And it shows. The literature on post-politics is dominated by the description of meta-level discourses and ultimately relies on the analysis of structures rather than agencies. As Raco and Lin (2012, 195) have observed, even if urban “policy agendas *appear* to take on postpolitical forms and rationalities, this does not necessarily mean that very real divergences and conflicts have been, or can easily be, eradicated”.

Swyngedouw argues that the post-political is a condition, globally occurring, part of the contemporary urban fabric. Even according to its own reading of the age, however, there is a politics to the post-political condition - neoliberalism - and the key features of this condition (e.g. mainstream political consensus around the market interests of the global economy) are ongoing political achievements (Dean 2009, 23). Perhaps this contingency explains why it seems hard to pin down post-politics (and research) in urban contexts. Raco and Lin’s (ibid.) go on to make the point that urban agents of postpoliticism are nowhere to be seen in much of the literature and hence the very specific local forms postpolitical constructs like sustainability take are difficult to explain. Rather the discourse and the police apparatuses, with their ability to reproduce globally, are sources of explanation. Post-political arrangements are omnipotence and omnipresent. They also appear to be fairly unchanging. Much is assumed about the never-changing nature of political agendas, top-level institutional level decision making, and all sorts of backroom, behind closed-door interactions. A consequence, the literature has a certain fatalistic tone. Post-politics tends to happen to people, who occasionally react with radical reassertions of the political, but generally do not. As Crouch states, there is ultimately little reason to act given the small likelihood of achieving change:

“Under the conditions of a post-democracy that increasingly cedes power to business lobbies, there is little hope for an agenda of strong egalitarian policies for the redistribution of power and wealth, or for the restraint of powerful interests” (Crouch 2004, 4, cited in Swyngedouw 2011, 371).

Depressingly, there may be a lot of truth in this. However, this does not mean that researchers should deny the likelihood of change or, moreover, in the case of Swyngedouw (following Rancière), prescribe the way in which it will occur (via the heroic radical). Nor should they make ontological (or ontic) and conceptual claims which effectively negate the political import of multiple forms of agency, institutions and ideas, as well as much hope, before they even appear. Therefore while we agree that the post-political thesis is potent in capturing the spirit of the current political malaise, especially depoliticization in formal politics,

⁶ Larner (2014, 192) adds that (Swyngedouw 2010, 215) states that “I shall begin by accepting the transformation to a post-political and post-democratic configuration at face value”.

it does present a rather monolithic view, one which exists more convincingly on the theoretical than the empirical plane.

Diminishing the urban as a political space

Far from the common imaginary of the city as a vibrant political space, the post-political city thesis portrays the urban as a depressingly depoliticized terrain. Indeed, it questions the symbiosis between the city and politics. The difficulty this presents is not that the literature completely denies the ongoing contingency of urban space, of particular places, but that it marginalises the possibilities for the political contestation of and in the city. Through its assertion that there is a post-political urban condition, the possibilities of the city, or 'spaces of hope' (Harvey) within the city, are diminished. The urban police order is universal and all-encompassing, the urban political is isolated and random. In a sense, the thesis, taken to its logical conclusion, undermines the understanding of the city as a site of struggle and possibility as well as compliance and fatalism. If truly political agency is seen exclusively, in that it must exist outside of the urban post-political order, and if "political space is a space of contestation inaugurated by those who have no name and no place" (see Swyngedouw 2014, 178), then the potential of the urban to foster true politics shrinks. Ultimately, the post-political city thesis seems to deny the potential of many of the forms of politics and agency with which its proponents might normally sympathise.

Saving the city: researching depoliticisation, avoiding the post-political trap

Surely, it is better on empirical and ontological grounds to adopt a more open view of the potential of the city as a place of struggle and a site of (radical) political agency. The urban as a heterotopia (Foucault 1993), both phantasma and concrete place, yields political agency through specific conditions for subjectivation. So to think of the true political space as a universal space produced and shaped by placeless agents denies the political potential of cities as distinct social formations. Of course, cities are pivotal to the global economy as generators of wealth and nodes in trade and communication. They have become prime sites of neoliberal "accumulation through dispossession" (Harvey 2003), the concentration of wealth through privatization and commoditization of public assets. Urban politics is starkly shaped by the depoliticising effects of global change. However, urban struggles of many hues have been very apparent (e.g. in 2011). And the dialectical intensity of global-local interconnections in cities provides opportunities for the (local) contestation of global processes. Hence as we observe cities gain importance around the globe, in terms of population, of social cohesion, of economic value and political struggle, we would expect sites of contestation to multiply as ever larger parts of the population start to live and work in cities. Hence it is necessary to account for the increasingly contested nature of the city globally, to focus on struggle and conflict, without referring to very specific recipes of how urban contest and politics should occur.

If we determine that urban research should be saved from the post-political trap, how, then, should we research urban politics and depoliticisation? We close this commentary by making a number of modest suggestions. They do not involve substituting optimism for the pessimism of the post-political thesis. Nor do they rest on an absolute rejection of Swyngedouw's arguments. Rather, they reassert contingency and, along with it, a measure of hope.

1. Depoliticization reshapes rather than obliterates the political

In line with recent theoretical work across the social sciences, future urban research should explicitly consider both depoliticization and (re)politicization within the same analytical lens, as being often dynamically interlinked (Hay 2007; Chatterton et al, 2012; Featherstone and Korf 2012; Jessop 2014). Depoliticisation can be understood more as a contingent political strategy that a political condition (although general democratic challenges are accepted). Empirically, politicizations, and new forms of democratic politics continue to be apparent. As Keane argues (2009) with his notion of the 'monitory democracy', direct power scrutinizing mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting, have become ever more important in democratic politics. Their potential to resist the "tyranny of participation" (Swyngedouw 2014, 177), the contingent and local politics they produce, should be ontologically accepted and empirically researched.

Depoliticisation is inherently related to 'the political' and its counterpart 'the non-political (or apolitical)'. A consequence of seeing depoliticisation and politicisation as inherently linked is that we accept that the boundaries of the political cannot be fixed in essential terms – as a pure and discrete realm. The distinction between the political and apolitical realm becomes a matter of empirical investigation and not definition. Research might want to address how the definition of the political – through discursive and institutional practices – reshuffles the practices of politics. Indeed, the exact, albeit never fixed, drawing of the boundary between the two is an integral part of (de)politicization and the normative and institutional ordering of politics which emerges from it. Depoliticisation will always, through the politics its silences, create the conditions for its own depoliticization and to understand this interplay is key to comprehending the possibilities of urban politics.

2. Depoliticization re-articulates and re-draws the boundaries of political agency and possibility in urban politics

Although there are other ways to think about the relations between political agency and (de)politicisation, one approach would be to consider them as processes in what the political scientist Schattschneider (1975) called "the conflict of conflicts", the broader contests by which more particular contests appear, and the capacities of political agents to engage in this conflict. As a political strategy (de)politicisation might be used by many actors and not only right-wing neoliberals. Such an approach accepts that the political world is inherently marked by antagonisms and conflicts (Mouffe 2013). However, only some of them rise to the surface of the political; that is they become public or a matter of public action and deliberation. Most conflicts, however, remain apolitical, that is taken-for-granted and naturalized. (De)politicization as a political strategy is an integral part of managing urban conflicts and rationalising urban governance. Future research on (de)politicization should focus on the practices to articulate, remove, displace or obstruct urban conflicts as/from the political. It could ask how political agency in urban politics is conditioned by the boundaries of the political and the resulting possibilities for subjectivations.

A key component of depoliticization is to deny the legitimacy of agents, interests, claims as political, as of general concern (see Rancière on the production of common). So, depoliticization is about redrawing boundaries, limit the scope of contestation and restricting the ways people make sense of themselves as political agents. "For this reason it is probable that there exist a great number of potential conflicts in the community which cannot be

developed because they are blotted out by stronger systems of antagonism” (Schattschneider 1975, 66). But these stronger systems of antagonism and the invisible conflicts (what might be termed the generally occurring and contingent conditions of the post-political) are genuinely unstable because they rest on conflicts between a plurality of political agents.

3. The city serves not only as a setting for depoliticization but is the very thing at stake

Hence in some places depoliticisation might actually work. Hence the potency of Swyngedouw’s argument that the political is being washed-out of the urban fabric. But in other places and times, people are able to resist or appropriate these post-political articulations of power (e.g. on German cities see Becker et al. 2015). This is still especially the case in cities with their tradition, symbols, and organization as political spaces. Conflicts arise and become visible in- and outside the political system. This visibility is crucial for a conflict to become political - it must be perceived and appreciated as an open conflict which belongs to the political sphere. This implies that other people accept the conflictual claim as legitimate and are thus willing to accept as ‘political’ the agency associated with it.

Of course cities do not per se facilitate politicization. Researchers have convincingly argued that spatial practices determine the opportunities for political activities. In her study on “Brave New Neighborhoods”, Kohn (2004) shows that the spatial organization of cities and the corresponding opportunities for diverse social encounters condition the opportunities for collectivities to organize themselves and to gather public attention for their needs and claims. She deciphers the conversion and reframing of public spaces as a tactic or an element in the process of the depoliticization of cities. So cities as sites of politicization require particular spatial patterns. The provision of public space, as Kohn argues, must go beyond leisure, recreation and consumption. The public space is a “place for staging polemical scenes, a site where the conflict between opposing interests is made visible and subject of dispute.” (Kohn, 2013: 107). Given the centrality of cities for public contestation, the urban form is the very thing at stake in (de)politicization. Swyngedouw argues this too but he assumes a different starting position (of a post-political age): that much of the potential for political contestation has already been lost. In line with preceding assertions our starting position is one of contingency, that sees the fault lines in, and not only, the depoliticized urban context.

In sum, we think that Swyngedouw and the post-political thesis he advances is timely and important because it questions the historical relationship between the city and the political. Like him, and many other urban researchers, we share his anxiety and insist on the - continued- fusion of the urban and the political. What we emphasize is that it is necessary to engage clearly with politics as it is and politics as we would like it to be. In terms of advancing the discussion on depoliticization or post-politics in cities, this requires both more empirical and ontological work. This should be a robust and reflexive engagement, exposing empirically the deficiencies of urban politics and the injustices which emerge from it, whilst being more tentative in - ontological- terms of how we might recognize politics. This can certainly involve further engagement with Ranciere, but it might involve setting a lower threshold for what counts as politics or political agency, for instance following Marchardt’s notion of “minimal politics” (cf. Purcell 2014). Ultimately, it might also be time for the urban depoliticisation debate to reflect on the plurality of perspectives on what politics is, thinking more not simply about the ontology of urban politics, but the ontological politics of the urban.

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