

**TITLE**

What Do Cities Have to Do with Democracy?

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**JOURNAL**

International Journal of Urban and Regional Research

**DEPOSITED IN ORE**

17 April 2015

This version available at

<http://hdl.handle.net/10871/16861>

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**THIS IS THE PRE-PUBLICATION SUBMITTED VERSION OF  
THE FOLLOWING PAPER:**

**What do cities have to do with democracy?**

Clive Barnett

FORTHCOMING IN *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF URBAN AND REGIONAL  
RESEARCH*

## **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between urbanization and democratization remains under-theorised and under-researched. Radical urban theory has undergone a veritable normative turn, registered in debates about the right to the city, spatial justice, and the just city, while critical conceptualizations of neoliberalism present ‘democracy’ as the preferred remedy for injustice. However, these lines of thought remain reluctant to venture too far down the path of political philosophy. The relationship between urban politics and the dynamics of democratization remains under-theorised as a result. It is argued that this relationship can be usefully understood by drawing on lessons from avowedly normative styles of political theorizing, specifically post-Habermasian strands of critical theory. Taking this tradition seriously helps one to notice that discussions of urbanization, democracy, injustice, and rights in geography, urban studies and related fields invoke an implicit but unthematized democratic norm, that of all affected interests. In contemporary Critical Theory, this norm is conceptualised as a worldly register of political demands. It is argued that the the conceptual disaggregation of component values of democracy undertaken through the ‘spatial turn’ in recent Critical Theory should reorient the analysis of the democratic potentials of urban politics around the investigation of the multiple forms of agency which urbanized processes perform in generating, recognizing, and acting-upon issues of shared concern.

**KEY WORDS:** all affected interests; critical theory; democracy; normativity; urban politics

## INTRODUCTION

Recent political events such as the uprisings associated with the Arab Spring in 2011, the activism of indignados around the 15-M movement in Spain, and the emergence of Occupy activism in cities across the world, have served as the occasion for rehearsing arguments about the importance of space, place, and perhaps above, the city as an arena of political action (e.g. Critchley 2012, Ghannam 2011, Harvey 2012, Swyngedouw 2011, Thomassen 2012). These discussions continue to work through a long standing intuition that cities are important crucibles for radical democratic expression, an intuition only heightened by the observation that increasing numbers of people now live in urban areas (e.g. Brenner 2009). What is notable about each of these examples, however, is the degree to which they take place *in* cities without limiting their political demands to urban issues, narrowly conceived, nor addressing only urban-scale institutions as the objects of those demands. The question addressed here is whether contemporary urban theory is adequately configured to analyse and understand this relationship between the contemporary politics of democratization, and the contemporary politics of urbanization. I argue that in fundamental respects it is not, and suggest that an engagement with normative political theory that has tended to focus on ‘global’ scales might well enhance the capacity of urbanists to better grasp this relationship – not least, by helping to de-compose ‘the urban’ in to a set of analytically distinct dimensions of political action.

The next section of the paper, *Democracy in Radical Urban Theory*, outlines the case for thinking the relationship between urbanization and democracy in new ways, through a critical reading of existing approaches to this question. It identifies a persistent tendency in urban theory to avoid sustained engagement with normative theories of democracy. It is here that my own argument starts. The following section,

*Relocating normativity in radical urban theory*, explores the tension between thinking of the normativity of democratic politics as foundational and/or as strategic, by arguing that practices of justification are important aspects of social practices which help to account for why particular senses of injustice matter to people; and it draws out the spatial implications of this argument. The fourth section, *Rethinking the Geographies of Affectedness*, shows how the transformation of the principle of all affected interests by critical theorists of deliberative democracy opens a space for considering the generative force of urbanization in animating democratic contention. The fifth section, *Assembling communities of the affected*, then sets out how the transformation of this principle presages an agenda for developing a geographically sensitive investigation of the variable roles played by urban processes in shaping the geographies of contemporary democratic agency.

The main claim of the argument here is that better understandings of the relationship between contemporary urbanization and the prospects of radical democracy can usefully learn from contemporary, post-Habermasian Critical Theory and its distinctive treatment of questions of democracy, justice, and participation. The spatial ‘pay-off’ from engaging more fully with this tradition comes from attending closely to the importance of the concept of all affected interests as a worldly norm of democratic critique. More precisely, I argue that ‘the urban’ can be creatively re-conceptualised as playing multiple roles in assembling potential and actual communities of affected interest around which democratic energies are organised. It follows that urban processes might be more important to contemporary radical democratic politics than is often acknowledged, but that ‘the city’ is not necessarily the key stake nor site for such politics.

## **DEMOCRACY IN RADICAL URBAN THEORY**

Recent research on urban politics has been marked by a sustained interest in theorising the normative supports for thinking of urban spaces as sites of democratic possibility. This is most evident in the burgeoning literature on ‘the right to the city’ (e.g. Dikeç and Gilbert 2002, McCann 2002, Parnell and Pieterse 2010, Purcell 2002) and ‘the just city’ (e.g. Marcuse *et al* 2009, Fainstein 2010). This work often converges with arguments about urban democracy (e.g. Amin and Thrift 2002), the ‘good city’ (e.g. Amin 2006), the emancipatory city (Lees 2004), and ‘spatial justice’ (e.g. Soja 2010). Democracy now provides the rallying call of even the most radical of geographical analyses of neoliberalizing accumulation by dispossession (e.g. Harvey 2003). The absence of democratic politics is increasingly recognised as a key factor in the reproduction of social injustice and inequality, and the exposure of vulnerable or marginalised groups to serious harm (Ettlinger 2005). At a more abstract theoretical level, new styles of spatialized ontology have opened up new understandings of ‘the political’ (e.g. Massey 2005), and drawn spatial theorists into debates informed by a distinctive strand of contemporary political theory that focuses on the agonistic, dissensual aspects of democracy understood as an ethos of contestation (e.g. Dikeç 2007, Featherstone 2008).

Engagement with democratic theory in spatial disciplines such as human geography, urban and regional planning, and urban studies has been framed by a contrast between the consensual orientations of deliberative democrats on the one hand, and the worldlier perspectives provided by post-structuralist theories of radical democracy and agonistic pluralism on the other (e.g. Purcell 2007). Debates around communicative planning best exemplify this framing, in which the communicative paradigm is found to be inadequately attuned to the operations of ‘power’ (see

Campbell and Marshall 2006). On the one hand, agonistic approaches define democracy in a one-sided way, in so far as they reserve democratic energies for the contestation of identities and hegemonies (see Karagiannis and Wagner 2008). By contrast, the defining issue for critical theorists of deliberative democracy is how to conceptualise the relationship between the identities, issues and opinions generated in agonistic public action, and the institutionalized exercise of legitimate power (see Cohen and Fung 2004, 28-31).

Both sides of the democratic problematic – contestation and legitimate concerted action – are kept in view by the tradition of Critical Theory that underwrites contemporary theories of deliberative democracy, and its offshoots such as ‘communicative democracy’ and ‘discursive democracy’ (see Scheuerman 2006). The idea of a critical theory of democracy is guided by two related criteria: identifying emancipatory possibilities which approach accepted standards of normative legitimacy; and identifying emancipatory possibilities which approach a minimum threshold of political efficacy (see Fraser 2008). Settled conceptualisations of the spaces in which both these criteria might be practically realised have been undermined: it has become difficult to maintain a taken for granted assumption that the *demos* in which questions of legitimacy are settled is or should be equivalent to a national public; and it has become equally difficult to maintain that the sole agent of legitimate will-formation and decision is or should be the nation-state. Amongst critical theorists, these theoretical and empirical issues have been addressed primarily through debates about cosmopolitanism and transnational justice (see Delanty 2009).

In order to further develop the potential of this Critical Theory tradition for thinking about the relationship of democracy and urbanization, it would be necessary to acknowledge the importance of contestation in critical theories of deliberative,

discursive and communicative democracy (Barnett 2011b). It is also necessary to acknowledge that critical theory has moved on from the Frankfurt School's epistemic model of the critique of instrumental reason (cf. Brenner 2009). It has been transformed, via Habermas's theory of communicative action, into a fully-blown critical theory of democracy and the public sphere. In this move, Critical Theory is reconfigured around a distinctive variant of the democratic norm according to which all those whose interests are potentially affected by a decision should have a say in the shaping of that decision – the so-called all affected principle (e.g. Habermas Benhabib). In short, the potential of Critical Theory to inform an analysis of the relationship between urbanization and democracy lies in the further consideration of the urbanized geographies of affectedness through which democratic contention is generated, disseminated, and institutionalised.

The all affected principle is central, although unthematized, in arguments that processes of globalisation requires us to rethink the political geographies of democracy both 'above' and 'below' the level of the nation-state. For example, Amin, Thrift and Massey (2005) argue that there is a need to respatialize the democratic imagination to match the scope and complexity of globalized interactions. The implicit claim is that current practices of representative democracy exclude some affected persons from decision making in so far as these practices are still imagined and institutionalised as territorialised at the scale of the nation-state. Whilst co-authoring a call for re-specializing democracy that seems to invoke an extension of the all-affected principle, Amin and Thrift (2002) and Massey (2007) have also made detailed cases for how and why urban spaces remain crucial scenes of democratic potential. These arguments draw on networked and topological understandings of the



role of cities in gathering together, coordinating and configuring globalized and transnational flows of people, goods, and ideas.

Neo-Marxist explanations of neoliberal urbanization provide the clearest account of how the globalization of economic dynamics of accumulation is internally related to an intensification of various sorts of urbanized contention. In these accounts, the ‘hollowing-out’ of state capacities at the national level has been undertaken through the progressive re-scaling of various governance, welfare, and accumulation capacities to the level of the city-region (e.g. Brenner 2004, Swyngedouw 2000). It is argued that this re-scaling is internally related to an increasingly unstable dynamic of accumulation that is expressed through ever accelerating rounds of creative destruction of the urban built environment. The contradictions of neoliberalizing capitalism as a regime of accumulation and mode of governance are therefore increasingly concentrated in the rhythms and spaces of urban life itself (Harvey 2008).

The political-economy analysis of urban neoliberalism provides the theoretical frame for the growing interest in the concept of ‘the right to the city’, an idea originated by Henri Lefebvre (1996). One step in the development of this concept has been the argument that injustice is being increasingly urbanized (Merrifield and Swyngedouw 1995). The argument is that more and more political contention is generated by the deepening dependence of social reproduction on urban infrastructures, through which state capacity and the logics of accumulation reach into everyday life. The notion of ‘the right to the city’ supposes that there is a cluster of activities that count as ‘urban politics’ not just because they take place in particular places – cities - but because they revolve around urbanized issues of contention (the concentrated, material conditions of social reproduction) and around distinctively

urbanized value-claims: the right to certain minimal standards of habitability, or ‘inhabitation’ (Purcell 2007).

The right to the city literature therefore makes two significant contributions to understanding the urbanized dynamics of contemporary democratic politics. First, it provides a clear account of how a great deal of this urban politics articulates with processes of national, transnational, and global reach. Second, it alights upon and elaborates the substantive, distinctively spatial content of the norms shaping contentious urban politics around the world that are increasingly gathered under the heading ‘rights to the city’ movement - ‘spatial’ elements relating to claims about dispossession, access, habitability, privacy *and* publicity, and so on.

The ostensible normative focus of the ‘rights to the city’ analysis of the politics of neoliberal re-scaling of capital accumulation and governance tends to be on claims about rights, equality, and social justice. However, as already noted, theorists of hegemonic neoliberalism increasingly argue that ‘democracy’ is the key principle of contestation to globalized neoliberal urbanization should be democracy (e.g. Purcell 2007, Swyngedouw 2009). In trying to relate observed patterns of dispossession, exclusion, exploitation, or inequality to the specific value of democracy, an unacknowledged appeal is made in radical analyses of urban politics to the principle of all affected interests. The all affected principle is implicit in the attempt to connect these concerns to the specifically *democratic* problem of who should be included in decision-making processes, and how. The principle is present in at least two ways. First, the ‘right to the city’ literature draws on a theoretical paradigm which simultaneously explains how certain key decision-making processes (particularly over welfare provision and labour market regulation) are being re-located to the level of urban and regional governance structures while excluding those subject to these

processes. Second, this strand of urban analysis presumes that the impacts of globalizing neoliberalism are increasingly affecting people not only located in cities, more specifically through the impact that these processes have on a range of urbanized infrastructures of care, education, housing, land markets, water and welfare.

If the all affected interest principle is implicit in the critical postures of radical urban theory, it is not explicitly thematized as providing a ‘normative support’ for these critical positions (cf. Boltanski 2011, 31). Whether or not such a support is required is open to debate (see Barnett 2011a; Olsen and Sayer 2009). It might be claimed that the normative values of justice, equality, or emancipation which provide the animating core of the sorts of politics analysed by theorists of ‘the right to the city’ or ‘spatial justice’ are immanent to the arenas of contestation being investigated (see Barnett 2011a). But by cleaving so closely to the terms of critique deployed by actors involved in struggles for social justice or democratic equality themselves, while abjuring itself from the task of normative justification, radical urban theory risks misrepresenting the normative vocabulary of these sorts of struggles as merely instrumental contrivances. In order to negotiate a path between the demand for robust foundations for the normative stance of critical social science and the merely elective alignment with the concerns of subaltern movements, my argument here seeks to relocate the force of normativity squarely in the world. It does so in order to elaborate a programme for the analysis of the formation of democratic contention through varied ‘moral grammars’ of claims-making. The first step in this argument, to which we now turn, is to recognise the place of normative practices of justification, broadly conceived, in the emergence of political action aimed at addressing injustice.

## **RELOCATING NORMATIVITY IN RADICAL SOCIAL THEORY**

The flourishing of normative vocabulary in recent urban research remains bound by a particular understanding of just what ‘normative’ values are able to do for social scientific analysis. It is not that radical urban theory suffers from a lack of criteria for guiding judgements of what is and is not ‘democratic’. As we saw in the previous section, the ‘right to the city’ idea has been made central to an assertive claim about urban politics having a global importance in driving radical democratic possibilities in the contemporary conjuncture. For Harvey (2008) the struggle against the hegemony of finance capital should be centred on the ‘right to the city’ idea, since the inherent dynamic for the overaccumulation of capital finds its unstable resolution in the financialized recycling of capital surpluses into the creative destruction of urban environments. However, Harvey situates ‘the right to the city’ as a merely strategic device – as a ‘slogan’ and an ‘ideal’ - for achieving the singular focus of a unified confrontation with the global dominance of finance capital; more recently, as an ‘empty signifier’ which may or may not be articulated in a revolutionary direction (Harvey 2012). Harvey worries that contemporary urban politics lacks this unifying focus (see Harvey 2009). Harvey deduces the need for a singular strategic focus around class-struggle by conflating the *generality* of capitalist social relations with the *universality* of class as a transcendent principle of equivalence (see Young 1998). The presumption is that contentious urban politics can and should converge on a single, unified focus of global struggle, and that the principle of this universalization (i.e. class) can be decided upon through the abstract theoretical deductions of Marxist theories of capital accumulation and the production of space. The presumption is indicative of an imbalance between diagnostic critique and normative reconstruction (Wright 2006), an imbalance that characterises radical spatial theory more broadly (Sayer 1995).

Of course, not all radical urban theory holds to the centrality accorded to class in Harvey's account of the right to the city, affirming instead a plurality of identities and issues around which emancipatory politics can and does form. However, the radical contextualism of poststructuralist cultural theory which informs more pluralistic strands of radical urban theory, with its suspicion of universalist rationality as a ruse of power, means that this affirmation stops short of any significant critical engagement with the normative claims enacted by different axes of contentious politics. Radical urban theory's normative turn remains rather reluctant to venture too far into the territory of philosophical arguments about the validity or justification of this or that value. Until recently, the right to the city literature has deferred any serious treatment of the meaning and value of rights *per se* (see Attoh 2011); radical urbanists remain intensely suspicious of the normative dimensions of this idea (e.g. Merrifield 2011). The prevalent conceptualisation of neoliberalism reiterates a standard Marxian genealogy in which rights are presumptively regarded as inherently 'bourgeois', and complicit with individualization and privatization (see Harvey 2003). The related literature on the 'post-political' and 'post-democratic city' (Swyngedouw 2007) can do no more invoke ahistorical ontologized ideals about what democratic politics *should* be like in order to determine that, in reality, it does not accord to these ideals.

By restricting itself to a view of normative principles as either 'slogans' or 'ideals', radical urban theory's suspicion of normative theorising (see Katznelson 1995) leaves it ill equipped to analyse the constitutive role of the 'things that matter to people' (Sayer 2011) in shaping the terms of democratic contention. But the appropriate response to this normative reticence is not to simply spell out one's own preferred list of foundational commitments (. Olsen and Sayer 2009). As already suggested, one of

the strengths of the ‘right to the city’ literature is the sense that normative values are emergent from contentious politics. What radical urban theory lacks is not so much robust normative foundations, but rather, an adequate account of the worldliness of normative values.

To further conceptualise the relationship between urbanization and democratic politics, it might therefore be helpful to take a lead from styles of social theory that focus on the irreducible role of normative practices in the everyday coordination of human practices (e.g. Boltanski and Thévenot 2000, Bridge 2004, Sayer 2005, Smith 2009, Stark 2009, Tilly 2006). In this range of social theory, practices of justification are understood both as a means through which action is coordinated, but more than this, social conflict is understood to take place between and across different registers of justification (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). On the one hand, such work leads us to approach the normative models developed in political philosophy instrumentally. We might now think of these models not so much as foundations for social theory, but instead as highly formalized models of the ordinary grammars of justification which are dynamic aspects of social practices (see Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). On the other hand, this work points towards an analysis of the moral grammars of conflict that emerge from situated experiences of harm, disrespect, and misrecognition (Honneth 1995). And in both respects, this strain of social theory converges with a broader movement that affirms the priority of injustice in thinking about radical political potential, that is, which sees movements for justice as arising from situated felt experiences of injustice (e.g. Bernstein 2005, Sen 2009).

To further develop the argument that the relationship between urbanization and democracy can be understood in terms of the situated generation and articulation of varied experiences of injustice, the next section focuses on the ‘geographical turn’ in

recent post-Habermasian critical theories of democracy. There are two aspects of this literature that are particularly relevant.

First, drawing critically on Habermas's refashioning of democratic legitimacy in a communicative register (Habermas 1996), this literature redefines the all affected principle as an expansive communicative-affective register for the articulation of contentious political claims, rather than as causal criterion of inclusion. In this move, critical theories of democracy bring into view the variable norms through which claims of affectedness are expressed in the course of ongoing political contention.

Second, in thinking of normative values as immanent and emergent aspects of contentious politics, post-Habermasian Critical Theory repositions the task of critique in a more modest relation to the actual dynamics of political contention. It is not assumed that political action requires normative foundations to get off the ground. But it is assumed that critical reflection can reconstruct and elaborate the intuitions animating various conflicts and contestations, and raise the question of their legitimacy (see Cooke 2006).

The next section elaborates on the relevance of this double relocation of the force of normative values as emergent qualities of contentious politics for the analysis of the urban/democracy nexus; the section after the next then demonstrates how a re-fashioned understanding of the all-affected interests principle can inform a reconceptualisation of the urban dimensions of contemporary democratic energies.

## **RETHINKING THE GEOGRAPHIES OF AFFECTEDNESS**

Long central to political theory debates about the so-called boundary problem of defining the *demos* (see Goodin 2007), the 'all affected interests' principle seems to be inherently spatial. The most obvious implication of the application of the all

affected idea seems to be that the spatial scope of democratic universalism should be extended beyond the boundaries of nation-states within which it has conventionally been contained (e.g. Held 1995). We saw in the previous section that this principle is implicit but unacknowledged in the arguments of geographers and urban theorists that democratic theory needs to be re-spatialized. However, in these disciplinary fields, as well as in the literature on global justice, the implicit sense of the all affected idea as a *causal* principle is tied to the presumption that social science can serve a diagnostic role in tracking chains of contemporary consequences, thereby helping to imagine the ‘re-districting’ of the *demos* of contemporary globalised politics (e.g. Shapiro 1999). This presumption installs social science as the monological authority on determining universal values, an authority which critical theorists of democracy are keen to challenge (e.g. Fraser 2008, 27-29). Taking this concern seriously should lead us to resist the immediate embrace of the all affected principle as straightforwardly geographical.

In theories of deliberative democracy, the ‘all affected interest’ principle of democratic inclusion is, via Habermas’s discourse ethics and theory of communicative action, into a critical principle of inclusive communicative action. According to this principle, normatively acceptable, legitimate decisions are those which meet with the agreement of all affected parties who have the opportunity of subjecting them to critical debate and discussion (Habermas 1996, 107). The translation of the all affected principle into a communicative register implies that the spaces through which democratic legitimacy is articulated and contested are contingent on the geographies of participation and representation in communicative practices (see Barnett and Bridge 2012). This section outlines two important consequences for how we think about the geography of democratization which follow



from the translation of the principle of affected interest into a communicative register in post-Habermasian theories of democracy.

The first consequence pertains to how we think about the geographies of the all affected principle. Applying the all affected principle might in theory extend the scope of any potential demos beyond territorial limits, by drawing into view the extensive reach of various causal processes. However, by calling into question the strongly causal interpretation of the principle, the importance of situated contexts to sustaining democratic politics is brought into view. The strictly causal application of the all affected principle which underlies many discussions of global cosmopolitan democracy and of global egalitarian justice is undermined by thinking of the consequences of global processes in terms of ‘interdependence via indefinite social activity’. As Bohman (2007, 24) puts it, “global activities do not necessarily affect everyone, or even the majority of people, in the same way. Rather, the sort of social activities in question affect *indefinite* numbers of people”. This means that affected actors cannot be as easily individuated as is sometimes supposed by social science invocations of the all affected principle. In Bohman’s version of Critical Theory, informed by American pragmatism, affectedness is understood as a condition that combines situated responses with a movement towards universalism (see Benhabib 1992). In short, affectedness is no longer thought of as a straightforwardly causal criterion. Rather, it is understood as an attribute that is worked out communicatively in situated contexts of reciprocal perspective-taking. And once all-affectedness is located within the orbit of a theory of communicative action, then the principle is also pluralised with reference to the different ‘sources’ of injustice and indignation. The shift amongst post-Habermasian critical theorists from a strongly epistemological understanding of rationality, towards a more expansive sense of the communicative

and affective conditions of experiences of disrespect, harm, humiliation, injury and injustice (e.g. Young 2001, Honneth 2007, O'Neill 2002), underlies an analytical concern with tracking the phenomenologies of injustice out of which democratic agency emerges (see Moore 1978).

Once the emphasis in contemporary Critical Theory on communicative action as a medium of democratic political agency is drawn out, then two important dimensions of the *situations* out of which grievances emerge, are recognised, and mobilized around come into view.

First, the translation of the all affected principle into a communicative register implies a methodological focus on the dynamic role of contestation in democratization processes – that is, a focus on the situated contexts in which the ‘cognitive potential’ for intuitive senses of ‘justice violated’ to be recognised and acted upon is realized in and through the articulation of political claims (see Honneth 1995).

Second, understanding these contestatory processes of claims-making requires also an analysis of the situated contexts in which capacities to develop solidaristic identifications and to acknowledge and act upon the claims of others are learned. In short, place-making practices might be more important conditions of possibility for spatially extensive practices of democratic contention than is normally acknowledged by political theorists of global justice or transnational democracy.

The first consequence of the communicative translation of the all affected principle is, then, to challenge a strongly causal interpretation that only underlies the ‘methodological globalism’ of debates about cosmopolitan democracy. In so far as the conceptual extension of the all affected principle rests on the sense that the scope of communicative action has expanded beyond territorial enclosures, then this

conceptual extension simultaneously requires a heightened concern for the situated contexts of social integration through which communicative capacities are worked-up (e.g. Bridge 2000, Calhoun 2007).

The second consequence of the translation of the principle of affected interest in post-Habermasian Critical Theory pertains more directly to the issue of how we understand normative values to circulate in the world. The all affected principle should be thought of less as an adjudicating criterion, and more as a worldly normative force generating political claims which draw on values of equal moral worth. On this view, the all affected idea is understood as providing a register for making *prima facie* claims of inclusion (see Dahl 1970). This interpretation alerts us to the importance of investigating the ways in which this principle is practically deployed as a resource in ongoing democratic contention. It is this aspect of the principle which is developed by critical theorists of democracy. So for example, Nancy Fraser argues that transnational activists are now applying the all affected principle directly to the framing of justice claims “without going through the detour of state-territoriality” (2008, 25). They do so by engaging in contestatory politics of representation which seeks to re-frame the geographical scales at which the subjects, objects and agents of justice-claims are articulated together. The same sense of affectedness as a register of claims-making is evident in the work of Iris Marion Young. Young’s account of ‘communicative democracy’ is framed by a norm of inclusion according to which “[t]he normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making process and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes” (Young 2000, 5-6). The emphasis on being *affected* by decisions is related to an understanding in which ‘calls for inclusion arise from experiences of exclusion’ -

from rights regimes, participatory forums, or public debates. It is this emphasis on normative values as registers of claims-making that is the distinctive mark of the critical-theoretic approach to democratic theorising I am commending here.

This section has argued that the reformulation of the all affected principle in a communicative, action-theoretic register implies that the spaces of democratic politics are contingent on inclusion and participation in effective communicative practices. Two aspects of this translation of the all affected principle have been emphasised.

First, a lesson for Critical Theory from spatial disciplines is that the communicative translation of affectedness should not be interpreted as a straightforward warrant for a type of ‘methodological globalism’ that presumes that the emplaced contexts of social integration – cities, nations, places - have lost their empirical significance or normative legitimacy as ‘containers’ of democratizing energies.

Second, and this is a lesson for spatial theory from critical theorists of democracy, the translation of the affected interest principle into a register of claims-making requires a methodological focus on the variable enactment of affectedness through plural normative registers of injustice.

These two ‘methodological’ consequences of translating the all affected interest idea into a deliberative norm – thinking of affectedness as an attribute constructed in situated communicative contexts, and of thinking of affectedness as a register of contestatory claims-making – combine to suggest an analysis of the contingent spatialities through which democratic agency is articulated. In relation to the question of what cities might have to do with democracy, these two consequences suggest that the answer is “It depends”. It depends, more specifically, on the variable roles that urban processes might play in the generation, recognition, and resolution of political contention.

Applying these methodological lessons to the field of urban studies suggests that analysis of the democratic potentials of urban politics should be reoriented around the investigation of the multiple forms of agency which urbanized processes might perform in generating, recognizing, and acting-upon issues of shared concern. Spatial theorists have become highly adept at theorising the ways in which different spatio-temporal configurations of action enact distinctive forms of power (e.g. Allen 2009). But less attention has been paid to the extent to which different forms of power unfold through the enactment of different types of normative claims – claims for equality, claims for inclusion, claims for fairness, claims for redress, claims for accountability, and so on. The translation of the all affected principle in contemporary Critical Theory can provide resources for supplementing the description of the spatial pluralism of contentious political claims-making (e.g. Boudreau 2007, Leitner *et al* 2008) with an analytic attention on the enactment of legitimacy claims through which emergent political formations unfold and extend themselves. The next section outlines a conceptual framework for pursuing this type of analysis.

### **ASSEMBLING COMMUNITIES OF THE AFFECTED**

Following Cochrane's (2007) genealogy of urban policy, the approach adopted here is to theorise the concerns of urban politics *ordinarily*, by acknowledging the family resemblances between various types of 'political' problematization in which the urban comes into the foreground. Rather than seeking a singular definition of the urban, a virtue should be made out of the fact that different intellectual traditions focus upon different understandings of the urban in order to make the case for thinking of 'the city' as a potential scene for democratic politics. Sometimes it is the idea of the city as an arena of capital accumulation and social reproduction (e.g. Harvey 2012);

sometimes it is the idea of the city as an expanded public space, in which patterns of social interaction provide the opportunities for addressing strangers over matters of pressing shared concern, as the privileged figure for a self-governing political community (e.g. Magnusson 2011); sometimes it is the idea of the city as jurisdictional scale, a seat of government or as a field of governance (e.g. Davies and Imbroscio 2009). In light of the argument developed in the previous two sections about the centrality of the all affected interests idea in the animation of democratic contention, these three emphases in urban studies literature can be mapped onto an analytical distinction between three aspects of affectedness. These three aspects correspond with three aspects of affectedness which Dewey (1927) elaborated in his account of the formation of democratic publics through an expanded sense of affected interest: an aspect of being affected by in a causal sense; an aspect of identification, or of ‘learning to be affected’; and an aspect of agency, of being able to act in concert. We might think of these as three rationalities of urbanized contention, and in this section each one will be elaborated with reference to one case of urbanized contention, drawn from the city of Durban in South Africa.

### **Being affected by urbanization**

Under the first aspect of affectedness, urbanization is understood as generative of particular objects of contention or intervention. Examples of urbanized political contention generated by actors recognising their status as being equally affected abound in the urban studies literature. In classical Marxist analysis of urban politics, the shared interest through which political solidarities are formed arises from actors being spatially configured as equally affected by certain authoritative processes – decisions around investment of surplus capital, or decisions around the management

and distribution of welfare goods and services (e.g. Castells 1983, Harvey 1985). Under this description, democratic contention is generated by urbanization processes, but is not necessarily contained in cities or urban places, in so far as urbanization processes impact upon non-urban politics through land markets, resource conflicts, or migration patterns.

In order to elaborate on this sense of urbanization as generating the ‘material conditions’ for democratic contention with variable geographical reach, consider the example of environmental justice activism emerging in the South African city of Durban since the mid 1990s. This is one aspect of a broader array of democratic innovations developed in the city since the early 1990s (see Ballard *et al* 2007; Low, Ballard and Maharaj 2007). Activism in and around Durban has become one model for the analysis of post-apartheid environmental governance and environmental justice (e.g. Leonard and Pelling 2010, Patel 2009, Van Alstine 2009). The movements which are the focus of this analytical attention emerge from highly distinctive localities in the South Durban area. The South Durban industrial basin is South Africa’s second largest concentration of industrial activity. Pollution has been a pressing concern for local communities in South Durban for decades. Local residents, who are predominantly poor black people, live in a highly polluted urban environment. The residential areas of South Durban suffer very high levels of air, ground, and water pollution, because of their contiguity to two oil refineries, a paper and pulp factory, and myriad petro-chemical plants, many of them owned and controlled by international corporations (Freund 2001, Peek 2002). The spatial conjuncture in South Durban of the uneven geography of industrial development before, during and after apartheid and the legacy of apartheid-era residential planning is the ‘objective’ background to the emergence of environmental contention in South

Durban (see Scott 2003, Chari 2010). This conjuncture has configured highly localised residential communities, otherwise divided by racialized differences and distinctive political histories, as objective ‘communities of affected interest’ by virtue of their spatial proximity to polluting industrial developments.

Of course, there is nothing automatic about the emergence of contentious politics in such a situation. As Marres (2005) argues, being affected by some process is not enough, in itself, to account for the emergence of contention as an *issue* of shared concern into the public realm. These conditions need to be made into issues. In the Durban case, making industrial pollution into an issue has depended on the resources and strategies available to activist organisations (Barnett and Scott 2007a). New forms of mobilisation have emerged from South Durban since the late 1990s around poorly regulated industrial development, focussing in particular on the health impacts of air and ground pollution. This upsurge of mobilisation is related to the living history of civic organisation and political activism in this area (Chari 2006). These new forms of mobilisation have succeeded in assembling the socially diverse and racially divided residential communities impacted by dirty industrial development into a self-consciously community of affected interest; and at the same time, they have established networks of affected interest of broader reach. Ongoing mobilisation has been highly effective in enabling Durban-based social movement actors to play a coordinating role in shaping national level policy and regulation by mobilising a network of other local campaigns into a national environmental movement with strong international linkages (Cock 2006, Aylett 2010).

The process of assembling communities of affected interest around issues of industrial pollution has involved less a process of ‘scaling-up’ and more one of ‘reaching out’ (Barnett and Scott 2007b; Allen 2009). In making this distinction, the



aim is not to make an ontological claim; it is to draw attention to the ways in which different registers of justification and legitimacy are used to articulate different spatialities of place, territory, and circulation. Durban-based activists have succeeded in linking up spatially discrete refinery communities across South Africa in places such as Cape Town, Sasolburg, and Richards Bay, all of which are similarly affected by the health impacts of localised proximity to industrial developments. The primary register in which this national network of affected interest has been extended is one of rights to *inclusion*: campaigning focuses on claims that local residential communities should localities have a say in the decisions about future industrial developments that will impact upon their living spaces. Assembling this community of affected interest has also involved Durban-based activists enrolling support from communities not immediately affected by industrial development in South Durban. This has included press-based campaigns which deploy a rhetorical frame emphasising health impacts on families and children and appealing to norms of *fairness* to elicit support amongst communities elsewhere in the city of Durban. And it has involved international networking with activist organisations across the world, in Africa, the United States, Mexico, and Europe, which represent communities mobilised around similar issues of the environmental and health impacts of refinery development. The international reach of these campaigns has been crucial in circulating a discursive frame in which corporate *accountability* and *redress* for past injustice is the means of maintaining mobilisation. The all affected principle therefore serves as a point of departure across these diverse modes of campaigning, but it is enacted in a variety of registers – of inclusion, fairness, accountability, and redress – which open up various spaces of engagement with potential supporters, antagonists, and intermediaries.

The example of environmental justice activism in and beyond Durban therefore illustrates how the political-economic dynamics of urban development can generate the conditions for the emergence of a politics of claims-making in which the intuitive sense of all affected - that people affected by negative impacts of economic policies and industrial strategies should have a say in their formulation - has played an important coordinating role. But in accounting for how these conditions have been articulated into an effective mobilisation strategy by movement activists, we can see the need to move on from the objective account of urbanization as a political-economic process generative of objects of contention, towards a sense of the urban as a communicative milieu in which issues of shared public concern emerge as topics of public debate, deliberation and dispute.

### Learning to be affected

If urban dynamics, theorised under one description, generate potential issues of contention, then urbanized infrastructures and patterns of interaction provide a distinctive medium for practices of opinion-formation and political subjectification. This aspect of affectedness is particularly important, given the emphasis discussed in the third section of this paper on situated 'lifeworld' contexts in which capacities to be affected are cultivated. It is these contexts of social integration that make possible the identifications with spatially and temporally extensive, indirect consequences. There is of course a long-standing tradition of presenting urban space as the privileged stage for the formation of publics. In geography and urban studies, the emphasis tends to be upon the spectacular dramaturgy of street protest and confrontational forms of mobilisation. While this tradition succeeds in foregrounding the importance of claim-making as an important dimension of political contention, it tends to underplay the

necessarily representative dimension of claim-making (see also Saward 2012, Dean and Jones 2012), and thereby misconstrue the spatiality of political claim-making by over-emphasising the spaces of co-presence of exemplary urban locations of protest. If, by contrast, we recognise the open-ended geographies of *address* through which claims-making constitutes public communicative spaces (Ivesen 2009), then two important issues come into view. First, dramatic urban communicative events draw on, are embedded in, and work over the ordinary communicative routines of urban life. As Bridge (2005, 104) puts it, “there are modes of communication in more fluid spaces of the city in which public building activities go unremarked”. Second, the audience, intended or otherwise, for such events is rarely if ever contained within ‘physical’ urban space itself, in so far as such events are usually aimed at attracting certain sorts of mediated attention.

The case of environmental activism in Durban discussed above illustrates both these points. Regular community meetings and dramatic street protests around refineries and in the public spaces of the city centre have been an important aspect of this organised mobilisation. But these remain embedded in and draw on a much more diffuse communicative lifeworlds in which shared narratives of dispossession, discrimination, and ill-health are circulated and reproduced (Chari 2009). These situated contexts provide normative resources and registers through which democratic contention can be articulated, and they significantly shape and constrain activist strategies (Barnett and Scott 2007a).

At the same time as engaging in regular meetings and protest marches in local communities, environmental justice activists from Durban have also deployed a repertoire of more spectacular protest in urban space which depends for its impact on being performed in particular cities at particular times. In this, the fact that Durban

and Johannesburg in particular are venues for international conferences hosted in Africa has been used as an occasion to publicise local demands. For example, the UN Conference Against Racism in 2001, hosted in Durban, was the occasion for local activists to articulate their long-standing claims about lack of government and business acknowledgement of their grievances to a national and international audience, through choreographed street protests and organised lecture tours of polluted neighbourhoods. Likewise, in 2002, the hosting of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg was used by activists' allies to stage dramatic protests at Durban refineries, in alliance with international Greenpeace activists, and street protests in Johannesburg aimed at highlighting complaints about environmental injustice in the 'new' South Africa. Durban's hosting of the COP17 Climate Change Conference in 2011 provided a further occasion for locally-based activists to network with international partners and project their concerns and claims beyond local or even national contexts. And the key point to take from this aspect of environmental justice campaigning in and around Durban – the coincidence of local grievances with the urban staging of international diplomacy and governance - is that some cities are more effective communicative spaces than others when it comes to assembling alliances and addressing powerful actors (see Marx et al 2012).

Assembling communities of affected interest can be seen, then, to be related to distinctive communicative aspects of contemporary urbanization and urbanism in at least two respects. First, urbanism 'as a way of life' provides a background against which ordinary capacities to be affected by indirect consequences are worked up and maintained. The distinctive rhythms and routines of dynamic interaction characteristic of urbanism, the focus of culturalist traditions going back to Simmel, Park, and others, are important mediums shaping the capacities to be affected which are crucial to

understanding the variable formation of publics around issues of shared concern (e.g. Lopes de Souza and Lipietz 2011). Second, the uneven urbanization of global governance and corporate control functions provokes particular styles of network organisation and coordination through which transnational publics of affected interest have developed (e.g. Sassen 2008). In both cases, while aspects of urban processes provide important resources for contentious politics and claims-making, in neither case does mobilisation in and through the communicative mediums of urban environments necessarily involve claims being addressed to city governments or urban-regional state agencies. The question of whether the urban is or should be thought of as an effective agent of concerted will-formation, the third aspect of affectedness we are considering, turns out not to follow naturally from the observation that lots of politics is urban under either of the first two aspects of urbanization considered so far.

### Affecting change in and through cities

A crucial aspect of the formation of democratic publics, from the Deweyian perspective on affectedness that informs deliberative and discursive theories of democratic politics, is the formation of effective agency to act on issues of shared concern (see Barnett and Bridge 2012). We have seen above that urbanization might be usefully thought to generate objects of political contention, and urbanism and urbanization provide communicative backgrounds that enable objective conditions to emerge as issues of shared concern. However, there is much more doubt over whether the claims for justice, rights, or redress that are articulated through these urbanized mediums are necessarily directed at urban-scaled sites of authoritative decision-making. Conventionally, theories of urban politics have depended on the idea that the

city or the local state is an effective, territorial power-container through which public action is coordinated through the agency of the state. In the case of the environmental activism in Durban discussed above, local city government has not been the primary object of locally generated, locally coordinated action around urbanized environmental injustice. The main targets have been national government, and international corporate actors – this is where activists understand effective centres of authority and power to be ‘located’ (Barnett and Scott 2007b). The fact that so much contentious politics, while often emergent from urbanized processes and coordinated through urbanized communicative fields, continues to be addressed to national and increasingly global and transnational actors is indicative of the degree to which the agents of contentious politics recognise that effective authority is not necessarily located in cities at all, but either in long-standing territorial forms or in networked configurations. In short, if we keep in view the sense that conceptualising democracy requires an account both of legitimacy and efficacy (see Fraser 2008), then the question of whether the city should be considered a privileged site for the redress of felt injustice or a site of democratic action remains very much an empirically open question (see Low 2004, Purcell 2005). In the Durban case, while particular types of urbanization process have combined to generate the conditions for the articulation of political grievances, organised mobilisation has not been focussed primarily on the scale of local urban governance. The metropolitan municipality of eThekweni has not been the main object of activist strategy – this has sought to address provincial government officials, national government ministries, and multinational corporations as the key agents of accountability, responsibility, and redress.

However, if ‘the city’ is not always or necessarily an agent of collective will-formation in the ways that urban theorists would often want it to be, then nevertheless

there are at least two important senses in which the urban is currently being reconfigured as a political agent. First, in discussions of climate change all the way through to discussions of ‘obesogenic environments’, the patterns and rhythms of urban built environments are identified in technocratic-administrative discourses as generating various problems requiring concerted policy interventions. In these fields, people are identified as being detrimentally affected by urban living in ways that escape their own volition or cognition, generating aggregate outcomes that require the reconfiguration of soft and hard urban infrastructures (e.g. Berlant 2005). At the same time, the aspect of urban politics relating to capacities to be affected is increasingly being reconfigured towards various anticipatory logics, for example in programmes of urban resilience or urban ecological security (e.g. Hodson and Marvin 2009, Crang and Graham 2007). In this sort of urban politics, the route of public formation which passes from being affected to recognising and then acting upon this recognition is short-circuited in the name expert interventions made by ‘choice architects’ in the name of public health, security, well-being, public order, or happiness, interventions which depend on technologies such as social marketing or urban design.

If, on the one hand, the ‘behaviouralist’ problematization of urbanization raises questions about the de-democratization of the dynamics of affectedness, then at the same time various practices of alternative urbanism seek to reconfigure the relations between being affected, affective learning, and affecting change in new and creative ways. For example, there is a family of experimental political forms which are configuring the urban as an agent of political transformation beyond narrowly governmental functions in response to paradigmatically ‘global’ problems: to adjust to impending ‘peak oil’ crises and adopt ‘low carbon’ practices in the case of the Transition Towns movement (e.g. Seyfang and Smith 2007); to contribute to trade

justice campaigns in the case of the Fair Trade Cities movement (e.g. Malpass *et al* 2007); or to develop alternative cultures of consumption in the case of the slow cities movement (e.g. Knox 2004). In all three of these cases, the built form of towns and cities, as material configurations of infrastructures which sustain specific practices, is certainly identified as a key agent of behaviour change, but not only by acting behind people's backs but also by configuring the everyday spaces of urban life and work as communicative spaces of public education and mobilisation.

These new problematizations of the urban provoke their own questions about the democratic potential of new modes of urban politics. Amin and Thrift (2005) call this range of issues the “silent politics of place”, by which they intend to draw attention to the myriad ways in which forms of ‘mundane governance’ are embedded as background in the infrastructures of urbanized living. They argue that these backgrounds should be brought into the open so that we might better understand the conditions which configure the experiences through which any felt sense of domination is made possible. A fundamental challenge for spatial theorists in addressing this type of politics is to develop non-reductive accounts of relationships between being affected, learning to be affected, and affecting change which can throw light upon how and when such ‘backgrounding’ processes generate felt senses of harm and injustice that are expressed in political action (see Barnett 2008).

This section has identified three aspects of affectedness – as generative of *objects* of contention, as a communicative *medium*, and as an *agent* of effective action. These three aspects are not open to a neat theoretical synthesis. The purpose in proposing this analytical distinction has not been to offer a new ontology of the urban. Far from it, it has been to re-present three strands of urban theory in terms of the aspects of affectedness that they most clearly disclose. The purpose in distinguishing



analytically between these three aspects has been to outline an agenda for investigating the multiple forms of urban agency through which communities of affected interest are assembled and configured in situations of conflict, competition, and compromise. This investigation should take seriously the multiple '*agencement*' of urbanization in democratic politics (Phillips 2006): where urbanization processes are understood as sources of grievance and felt injustice; where urban ecologies are understood as crucial communicative spaces making possible the affective dispositions upon which a spatially expansive sense of political agency depends, culturally and organizationally; and where urban infrastructures are increasingly understood as possessing agentive qualities in their own right in response to various collective problems.

## **CONCLUSION: ASSEMBLING AFFECTED INTERESTS**

There are three reasons for arguing that theories of urban politics could be usefully enhanced by an engagement with the wilfully 'normative' inflections of contemporary Critical Theory. First, this literature brings into view a specific normative principle - that of all affected interests - through which contentious politics is sometimes geographically constituted in a democratic register. Second, it is shaped by a modest, worldly understanding of the place of normative values in the enactment of social practices, which by repositioning the all affected principle as an intuitive starting point for claims-making, is attuned to how democratic politics unfolds in a world of inequality and injustice. And third, this literature is characterised by a methodological concern with tracing the combination of the constituent parts of the concept of democracy, a concern which can be usefully applied to the analysis of the urban/politics interface as well. In all three cases, the motive for taking avowedly

normative theories of democracy more seriously than they currently are in radical urban theory and related spatial disciplines is not only 'normative', if that continues to be understood in terms of an insistence that theories should somehow be strongly founded in moral principles. It is social-theoretical and empirical, derived from a sense that normativity is a dimension of social practice that is poorly understood when reduced either to the logics of discipline, legitimation, and subjection, or elevated to the status of utopian ideals.

An interest in developing a critical theory of democracy and its relationship to urbanization and urbanism requires us to do more than describe and explain patterns of grievance and causes of contention, and certainly do more than simply affirm weakly-justified utopian ideals. It also requires us to say more about the importance of urbanization than that 'lots of people now live in cities'. It requires us to attend closely to the normative vocabularies through which communities of affected interest are assembled, and seek to understand how these enable and constrain political strategies and consequential outcomes. And it requires us to attend to the varied roles that urban processes sometimes play in generating, recognising, mediating, circulating, and addressing political claims. If the response to the question 'what do cities have to do with democracy?' is "It depends", then a critical theory of democracy finds its place in the analysis of how this contingency is practically enacted. The conceptual translation of the all affected idea into a register of worldly claim-making, I have suggested, should lead us to decompose the urban/politics nexus in order that we might go about better understanding the contingent articulation of urban processes and political processes. In seeking to understand the emergent normativities of contemporary political action by focussing upon processes through which communities of affected interest are assembled *in* cities, *by* urban actors, *around*

urbanized issues, and *through* urbanized mediums, it might be possible to develop an appreciation of urban politics that escapes the intellectual, imaginary and disciplinary confines of ‘the city’.

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