The Return of the Political and the Struggle for a New Urban Commons: a view from Zagreb, Croatia

City & Society Forum: “Insurgent Citizens and the Spectral Return of the Political in the Post-Democratic City: Anthropologists engage the work of Erik Swyngedouw”

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Erik Swyngedouw’s work, placed in a tradition of critical geography peopled also by, amongst others, Doreen Massey, Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner and Neil Smith, is important both theoretically and in envisioning a new urban politics. Reading this text, and the impressive book from which it is drawn, I find many echoes with the recent experiences of urban activists in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia where, to cut a very long story short, protests for ‘the Right to the City’ have now metamorphosed into a political platform ‘Zagreb je naš’ (Zagreb is ours), inspired by some of the recent Spanish movements, particularly Barcelona en comu. In coalition with others, the platform formed part of a ‘left block’ which gained four seats in the city assembly in elections held in May 2017, after only three months of preparations. In a country dominated by authoritarian nationalism and a rampant radical right, left politics has been largely demonized in Croatia since the early 1990s, re-appearing in the public sphere commodified and marginalized in “festivals” in which foreign leftist intellectuals, disproportionately drawn from the Left Bank of Paris, tend to reproduce a kind of disconnected “salon socialism.” It is testimony to the strength of Swyngedouw’s work that he manages to marshal many of these same intellectuals in the service of urban insurgency, re-politicization and a radical utopian vision of egalitarian democracy.

I find particularly interesting the attempt, running through the text and the book, to address the tension between the particular and the universal. The urban insurgencies discussed are like each other and radically different from each other, simultaneously. The idea that political space is always specific but can serve as “the condensation of the generic”, even “the universal”, is incredibly important. It precisely sums up “the Right to the City” as both particular and transcendent of the particular. However, there is a real need to address the fact that variegated capitalism looks very different from different positionalities: in the core; on Europe’s semi-periphery which, perhaps, Croatia shares with Spain, Greece, Portugal and elsewhere; and in the periphery. I am not here treating ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ as a kind of ‘developmental slope’ with ‘modernity’ at the aspirant top, of course, but I am suggesting that urban struggles, both tactically and strategically, may look very different in sites where a kind of crony, predatory, asset stripping capitalism exists alongside, actually is inextricably intertwined with, a kind of clientelistic capture of the local state as we have in Zagreb. At the very least, perhaps this means that the discourses of struggle may have to be, at least to some extent, also different.

Reading Swyngedouw’s work reminds me also of the importance of a reconceptualization of the political as a relatively autonomous space of agency. The re-radicalisation of the political in an age of techno-managerialism and post-politics constitutes a kind of building block for new emancipatory practices. The invocation of the urban commons, moving beyond an increasingly irrelevant choice between “the market” and “the state” is, of course, crucial in theory and in practice. And yet, at the risk of sounding like an economic determinist, which I most surely am not, I would suggest that we neglect “his master the economy” at our peril. Modes of production, distribution, wealth and exchange, spheres of redistribution, the role of “fossil capital”, still matter. Too much commons thinking and acting is still shrouded in an idealistic illusion of a world in which conflicts can be resolved not fought, so that Swyngedouw’s invocation of an agonistic commons is an insight needing to be flashed out more fully in the future. Sometimes the rescaling of political struggle from the central to the local state, crucial as it is in terms of radical political imaginaries, can treat the local...
state as less immediately impacted by capitalistic power relations. However, as I am fond of pointing out, the same ratings agencies are at work in giving credit ratings to the city of Zagreb as to the state of Croatia, working along similar (neo-liberal) logics.

Ultimately, a radicalised urban politics, as reflected in the ‘rebel cities’ movement and elsewhere, is that which tries to combine a politics of insurgency with a practical politics of policy, of making a difference. Gazing admiringly on the performative, the immediate, the intense, the moment of rage, could distract one from the minutiae of the long and slow march through the institutions. In other words, what is to be done after winning a local election, or after gaining seats in a city council? What might constitute a radical politics of endless Monday mornings in the office. Is there a chance to be both revolutionary and reformist or to combine these in new, creative ways? Is there any point in engaging in the day to day tedium of policy work, work which may even be informed by technical knowledge and expertise, and still maintain the potential to be transformative? How can the different struggles be connected? After the squares have been cleared, after the tents have been broken up, can a politics of disruption and a politics of the possible be combined without this dissipating energy and selling out? It is one of the many attractions of Swyngedouw’s work that he provides a new grammar, even a new vocabulary, for answering these rather timeless questions.