

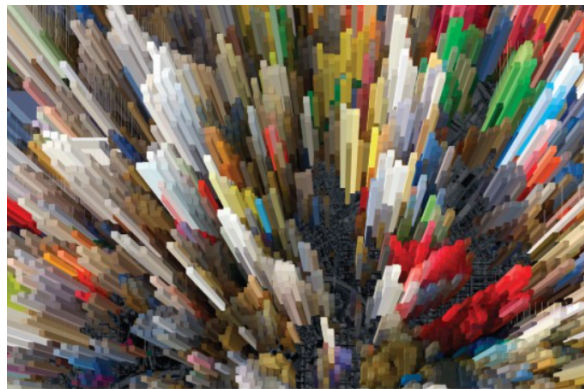
Book Review

Imagining the Political in a Post-Political Environment

Review of Erik Swyngedouw's *Promises of the Political: Insurgent Cities in a Post-Political Environment*. 2018. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 222 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262-03822.

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PROMISES OF THE POLITICAL

INSURGENT CITIES IN A
POST-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

ERIK SWYNGEDOUW



Erik Swyngedouw's book begins with a string of events such as the election of Donald Trump and Brexit, and moves on to the rise of authoritarianisms. Liberal democracies get resuscitated, ironically, through financial crisis, post-crisis accumulations by the elite, urban reforms, as well as multi-scalar ecological discourses. This is realized through performative displays, discussions, and resolutions through fixes. The post-political fixes seek to tweak the economy, urban processes, or ecology. These are designed to create a general impression that everything is in order. Everything may, in fact, be in order. It is just that the order is sustained by a silence of politics. The author problematizes this silence. Significantly, across urban spaces, insurgent movements by people 'who put their bodies on the line' also emerge in such situations. Urban insurgencies like the ones in Zuccotti Park, Paternoster Square, Taksim Square,

Tahrir Square or elsewhere, did threaten to break the silence of politics in the context of reconfigurations of 'democratic institutions'.

Swyngedouw's earlier works dwell on the impotencies of the political with close reference to governance, development in general, nature, hydrological cycles, and anthropocene. *Promises of the Political* consolidates these concerns, reinforced by more comprehensive theorization. Swyngedouw asks what happens when politics becomes reduced to sets of techno-managerial dispositifs or fixes. The techno-managerial dispositifs themselves are predicated on a profound lack of politics in public discussion and deliberative processes. It is doubtful whether emancipatory politics of any kind is



DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jea.6394>

Journal of Extreme Anthropology, 2018, 2(2):142-146, 2535-3241



possible in such a context. So do we end up by just fixing the system and perpetuating the entrenched orders?

The concern for how the political is eviscerated from public spaces underlies this work. Bereft of the political, the belief in post-democratic structures becomes entrenched. Swyngedouw's ethnographic sources for substantiating the post-political argument are the city and nature – urban and environmental processes. He engages with issues such as the erosion of democracy, weakening of the public sphere, removal of agonistic disagreements, colonization of the political or the silences of consensus processes. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Bob Jessops, Jean-Luc Nancy, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Colin Crouch emphasize similar post-foundationalist concerns. *Promises of the Political*, is more ethnographically grounded and turns its lens towards pertinent questions such as how ecology, in the present context, *pace* Badiou, becomes 'the new opium of the masses'.

Neoliberal planetary urbanization and carbon-centric fetishisation of ecology exemplify typical post-democratic processes. The techno-managerial dispositifs also make the political appear more spectral. This is so because post-democratic good governance enables controls to emerge outside the state and magically work inwards, through perceived or projected failures of the state. The controls take the forms of institutional practices nurtured by the state, international bodies like the EU, corporate apparatuses like the World Bank or non-state actors. But there is an accompanying rhetoric of participation, inclusion, or empowerment, unlike the rhetoric of entrenched state hierarchies. Good governance is usually attributed to horizontally laid out hybrids of private and state bodies. Power structures are dispersed from local (stakeholder bodies/committees) to transnational (Conference of Parties on Climate Change).

The different urban regimes are significant in the redeployment of the state into public and private realms and ensuring the cohesion of the civil society wherever there are stresses and strains in the system. This has been the case historically (1920s, 1990s or the 2008 crises). 'The opaque networks, fuzzy institutional arrangements and ill-defined responsibilities' make the democratic lacunae more profound. On the other hand, regimes shift welfarist obligations from the realms of the state into rational and individuated citizens who are 'empowered' and free from the state.

While discussing the changing themes of pluralist democracy, the question of legitimacy comes up. Legitimacy, unlike in a representative order, now relies entirely on discursive construction of images of the desirable. The author brings up the 'post-truth' environment in the context where there is a parallel silencing of alternatives. Bereft of clear channels of accountability and mediated by new institutions (local bodies, urban institutions) into an order over which there is no control, people find lesser channels for public engagement on what is desirable and what is not.

The state still remains the main deployer of this horizontally networked order. But markers of pluralist democracies turn diffuse. The ambiguities that ensue become the means whereby post-democracies deal with the crisis of legitimation. The state, through procedural un-clarities, becomes the corollary of capitalism. The crisis of the welfare state or that of Keynesianism institutes and legitimates the 'withdrawal of state rhetoric'. Any possible assumption of the loss in regulatory capacities is also misplaced. It is just

that the regulatory role appears to have shifted on to the individual who appears to be a volunteer who also has to take up responsibility for fallouts of the post-political order.

The book clearly differentiates the ritually codified policy making of post-democracies. Mouffe, Crouch and Rancière associate post-politics (consensus politics) with the rise of post-democratic institutional configurations. For Rancière, the political is the place where the police meet politics. Police refers both to activities of the state as well as ordering. But post-Althusser, policing is not just about interpellation, but about assigning the proper time and space for people. For Žižek and Badiou there needs to be an inaugural event which then becomes an interruption in the existing order. The political for them is about ruptures where the *Oochlos* (in Greek for rabble, mob, and multitude) becomes the *demos*. The re-appropriation of space as well as production of novel spaces that follow, away from state, parallels what Cornelius Castoriadis¹ calls a radical imaginary.

Swyngedouw portrays how the post-political frame reduces politics to policy making and techno-managerial solutions, mediated by institutions within the state, like parliaments, city chambers, or public private partnerships. The procedures involved are often exemplary. The good-governance, already mentioned, is about changes in governmentality. Apropos Foucault, this is the convergence of technologies that become pre-eminent against sovereign disciplining. Ironically, it is against the latter that the former often positions itself and gains legitimacy. The quasi institutional networks within public-private hybrids deploy the bios of humans (e.g. biometrics – that have become compulsion and contention in the contemporary Indian context) into managerial fixes. The scales of such networks range from urban developmental bodies to the European Union or the Conference of Parties (CoP) on Climate Change. The horizontal arrangements of good governance that transcend the state gain credibility through perceived state-failures.

In traditional liberal democracies, the state is articulated by political citizenry, and state power is exercised through policing, biopolitical controls or by the bureaucracy. In governance regimes, independent actors enter into normative agreements. Philippe Schmitter's idea of the transformation of 'political citizenry' into the post political 'stakeholder' has been appropriately brought in. Several holders (of rights, space, or knowledge, with stakes of status, or interests) become component parts and independent actors.

Agonistic differences are overridden by certain benchmarks and calculations of risks. State, for Swyngedouw, institutes the hierarchically organized scales as a gestalt wherein power becomes choreographed. Responsibilization, pluralist fragmentation, individuations, and calculations (of risk) become the programmes by which elitist rules translate into everyday practices. From the elaborations of the specifics of participatory deliberative practices, one understands how the procedures only happen within the 'possible' and normatively agreed.

The interplay of normal political programmes, civil society activities, and stakeholder participations constitute a holistic consensual frame that outlaws any dissonance.

¹ 1987, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Financial markets or austerity programmes become ‘socially disembodied’. But all of these are managed by experts, and policy makers through a governmentalised state apparatus. Dissonant voices are rendered incomprehensible or nonsensical. Power identifies only with self-contained wholes, with no conflicts or dissonance. It is in this context that the author mentions Bourdieu’s perspective on the depoliticisation of economics that is the obverse of the economisation of politics. What is indicated is the impossibility to subject the modalities by which social or natural resources get converted to goods and services to public choice.

Dwelling further on how ecology becomes the new opium of the masses or on specifics like the fetishisation of carbon in climate change, Swyngedouw elaborates on how nature is co-constituted in the unwillingness to politicize ecology. He points out that there was nothing foundational about nature; neither did nature look for salvation. Rather it needs the ‘recognition’ of unpredictability, radical contingency, non-linearity or variabilities. Works by Mustafa Dikec, Guy Baeten, Ingolfur Bluhdorn or Anneleen Kenis and Erik Mathijs have been aptly invoked. For the author, nature often becomes an unconnected fetish capable only of transforming into apocalyptic visions and fixes. The fetishisation of carbon, entailing carbon markets, demands politicization. It cannot be just about CO₂, but about land, repressions, speculative trading as well as neocolonial controls. After such radical recognitions, nature can no more be what it was. It is obvious that social orders need to be politicized.

Like nature, ‘sustainability,’ too, becomes an empty signifier. This is, unless it is perceived as an immunological response that seldom questions the order. Immunological responses are often propped up against imagined incalculable outsiders. So the pointers do not get limited to bacteria, CO₂ and waste but also extends to refugees, and financial crisis. In the realm of ecology, sustainability sets fields of consensus. Leading petroleum companies may join post-materialist scientists and drive in ideas of universal threats, risks and pervasive fears. This is how ecology becomes the opium of the masses. It replaces religion as the axis around which our ‘fears of social disintegration become articulated’. The techno-managerial solutions become the fixes for these fears, though nothing changes. On the contrary, as Swyngedouw says, ‘sustaining and nurturing apocalyptic imaginaries are an integral and vital part of the new politics of capitalism.’ The author aptly quotes Fredric Jameson (2003, 76) in this context: ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.’²

But we also read towards the final chapters that this immuno-biopolitical dispositif may be rapidly disintegrating in the face of actual ecological and social catastrophes. It is precisely such recurring catastrophes that strain normality. This is also when people came out in large numbers, be they be in, Istanbul, Cairo, Taksim, Berlin, Santiago or Hong Kong. What becomes interesting are the ways the uncounted and unnamed create new spaces through insurgent movements. The silences and lacks created in the post-political environ through urban consensus or nature-sustainability discourses could hold no more. Swyngedouw quotes Badiou who says: ‘a change of world is real when an inexistent of the world starts to exist in the same world with maximum intensity’³

² ‘Future City’, *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003.

³ *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. London: Verso.

(Badiou 2012, 56). Insurgency for the author becomes the ‘aesthetic register’ for articulating the unaccounted.

We see that the markers and sparking factors, of each and every event of insurgency are highly different. The threat to public space in Istanbul, austerity crisis in Iberia, authoritarian regime in Egypt, rise of public transport costs in Sao Paulo, gold-mining in Romania, were all different in this sense. But the heterogeneities, nevertheless unraveled into universal demands around ‘signifying banners of real democracy’. The particulars, we see, translate or transform into universals. The ruptures and fractures that the post-political fixes perpetuated, generated such insurgencies. The question that haunts Swyngedouw, though, is what happens after the streets are cleared. But as he sees it, the idea that is generated lasts longer than the event. The political thus emerges when the few claim the voices of many in public spaces across the world. The promise of the production of newer spaces of real-democracy is found to be embryonic to insurgent movements.

The present conditions are also examined from the stigmatized ‘idea of communism’. For Swyngedouw, it is the communist hypothesis that combines the idea of equality as immanent to democracy with recurring political struggles. There are critical insights on how capitalism transformed in the context of challenges to the existing order – both of state excess (China or USSR) or that of mass production (Fordist). Depoliticisation followed in such contexts either in the embracement of excess or, more often, in the emphasis on the individual’s right to be different. Fragmented individual identities often gelled well with the new spirit of capitalism after the 60s.

Multicentered capitalisms are well in operation in post neo-liberal contexts like India with oligarchic states ensuring corporate accumulations on ever greater scales. A consumption based freedom triumphs over politics for equality. There are other transformations like financialisation, and the new regimes of appropriating common intellects in information societies. Nature and space are also subjects of financialisation and techno-managerial fixes that endlessly defer the real-problem. Swyngedouw’s work, consistently, takes issue with the restoration of confidence in a system. For the *Promises of the Political*, the test of truth of the communist hypothesis lies in the new critique of political ecology that takes up the different dispossessions and reimagines radically different geographies.