

Edited by

Mark Davidson
& Deborah Martin

URBAN POLITICS

Critical Approaches

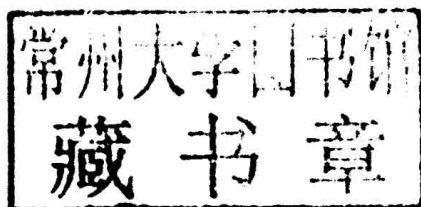


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URBAN POLITICS

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Deborah Martin and Mark Davidson

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1

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT URBAN POLITICS

Mark Davidson and Deborah Martin

It is now trite to call into question what we mean by the terms ‘urban’ or ‘politics’. The urban politics literature is full of attempts to develop more cohesive and/or distinctive takes on the conjunction. Theorizing urban politics is, of course, a useful exercise that mediates those countless passing deployments of the term. Indeed this mediation is a crucial political task itself. As the chapters in this collection demonstrate, there are important stakes involved in how we understand urban politics. For example, if we understand urban politics as something that happens *within cities* and across all *contestations* then we will arrive at different conclusions with regards to things such as the vibrancy of political life and democratic process.

The task of defining ‘urban politics’ is not only analytical, but deeply political. When we set out a definition of urban politics we identify our object of analysis. Critical theorist Slavoj Žižek (2006) refers to this general process of identification as an act of bracketing: ‘*the bracketing itself produces it objects*’ (56; emphasis in original). Urban politics does not simply appear to us when we decide to investigate it. Rather we have to actively construct an image of urban politics to start interrogating them. We do this by abstracting from the indeterminate set of processes that constitute the city and urban life. Without accepting this task we would be faced with a vast collection of phenomena that, if we did not select a few to focus upon, would certainly leave us paralysed, unable to start the process of making sense.

So bracketing is a necessary task in order to gain knowledge. But as Žižek (2006) explains, this task is not one that can claim to be neutral: ‘This