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Critical Urban Theory, Common Property, and "the Political"

Desire and Drive in the City

Dan Webb

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In this extraordinary book, Lacanian Psychoanalysis meets political theory in the streets of the city. The necessity of a radical political theory of the urban is explored with exquisite clarity and unwavering commitment to progressive change. If there is any hope for a different and politicized urbanity, it begins to shimmer between the covers of Dan Webb's book.

Erik Swyngedouw, *Professor of Geography, The University of Manchester*

Inner city gentrification is a violent form of exclusionary dispossession, visited upon the vunerable and precarious. Webb's wonderful book urges progressive urban scholars to respond in kind.

Nick Blomley, *Professor of Geography, Simon Fraser University*

Critical Urban Theory, Common Property, and "the Political"

Dan Webb explores an undervalued topic in the formal discipline of political theory (and political science, more broadly): the urban as a level of political analysis and political struggles in urban space. Because the city and urban space is so prominent in other critical disciplines, most notably, geography and sociology, a driving question of the book is: what kind of distinct contribution can political theory make to the already existing critical urban literature? The answer is to be found in what Webb calls the "properly political" approach to understanding political conflict as developed in the work of thinkers like Chantal Mouffe, Jodi Dean, and Slavoj Žižek. This "properly political" analysis is contrasted with and a curative to the predominant "ethical" or "post-political" understanding of the urban found in so much of the geographical and sociological critical urban theory literature. In order to illustrate this primary theoretical argument of the book, Webb suggests that "common property" is the most useful category for conceiving the city as a site of the "properly political." When the city and urban space are framed within this theoretical framework, critical urbanists are provided a powerful tool for understanding urban political struggles, in particular, anti-gentrification movements in the inner city.

Dr. Dan Webb has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Alberta and is an occasional member of the avant-garde academic circle known as the "Edmonton School." He is an independent scholar, author, and aspiring documentary film-maker based in Port Alberni, BC. When he's not reading iconoclastic leftist political theory, he's most likely surfing off the west coast of Vancouver Island or watching Lars von Trier movies with his wife, Lisa.

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Desire and Drive in the City
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This book is dedicated to all those unemployed, underemployed, and precariously employed PhDs out there. The system of higher education is broken. As a group we can work together to change it, but as an individual don't be afraid to quit it. There are many ways to live a meaningful life outside of the university.

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Introduction

Upon reflection, the word "urbane" is a peculiar one. It originates from the Latin *urbanus*, meaning "belonging to the city," but has come to signify the possession of refined, sophisticated, and cultured characteristics. The etymological connection to *urbanus* is telling because, of course, it is the city-dweller who is considered fine-mannered and courteous, while those who live in the country are uncouth, ignorant of culture, and lacking in social graces. There is no direct antonym for urbane in English, only a constellation of words that need to be invoked together in order to negate it completely. As a relic of the sixteenth century, the current definition of urbane as intimately tied to city life might appear puzzling. Sure, most high-culture amenities are found in cities, and urbanites tend to be more educated, but are not urban areas also where people do not know their neighbours, gang violence and drug addiction are rampant, and residents don't feel safe going out at night? Is it not in the country where people are more mannerly, hospitable, and honest, even if relatively simple and less worldly? If cities are so great at producing cultured and morally superior humans, why has it been such an object of scorn for so many of Western civilization's greatest minds: the Dickenses, Rousseaus, Emersons, and Heideggers of the world?

There are, of course, no answers to these questions because if there ever did exist a sixteenth-century consensus on the normative distinctions between city and country, it has long since collapsed. The only indisputable cultural truth about the social value of the city throughout history is that it has served as an object of fascination, invoking awe and disgust, promises of salvation and damnation, progress and corruption. If anything, in the contemporary context urbane should mean something more like "culturally uncertain" or "consisting of ambivalent social value." From a philosophical standpoint, this ambivalence may be a result of the city resembling something akin to a Kantian sublime object, although whether it belongs to the category of the mathematical or dynamic sublime, is unclear. Some cities are overwhelming to the senses due both to their tremendous size (mathematical) and by virtue of their prodigious diversity, energy, and utter complexity (the dynamic). Although coming to conceptual grips with the city has preoccupied philosophers, novelists, poets, and politicians for hundreds of years, attempting to define the city in its totality is a fool's errand – it is quite simply impossible, because of its sublimity. In fact,

I assert that theorizing the city poses the same problem that Theodor Adorno points to regarding the relationship between concepts and objects, whereby the truth of the latter will never be covered fully by the former. For Adorno, the task of the philosopher is to highlight that aspect of the object left out of its concept in order to grasp the truth of non-conceptuality. Politically speaking, to emphasize only one aspect of an object, while ignoring others, is always an act of power – power in the service of reproducing particular social discourses that define reality. In relation to urban matters, Adorno's insights are supported implicitly by Geoff Vigar et al. when they state:

> Invocations of the nature of contemporary cityness are … inevitably power-laden acts. They [urban planners] will pick out and highlight a small subset of the unknowable totality that constitutes an urban place in an effort to support particular normative notions of urban re-ordering, urban politics and urban redistribution over others.[1]

Maria Kaika provides an interesting example of how such a single aspect of an urban space is emphasized as representative of cityness in general, when she discusses how cities can be understood as "viewed" (eagle-eyed) and "lived" (urban praxis). An eagle-eyed view of the city is the perspective of the developer and "growth at any cost" politician. As "viewed," great cities are equated with dramatic skylines and vertical development. She claims that cities (like London) that have oriented much of their recent planning in the construction of new iconic buildings (the "Shard" and the "Gherkin"), demand that we approach the city as viewed. Kaika's point is that when cities are imagined falsely as totalities from the "viewed" perspective, we are simply to trust that these iconic buildings and skylines produce good cities.[2]

In the spirit of recognizing the impossibility of approaching cities as totalities, in this book I will examine the city from a particular or partial perspective, namely, through the lens of critical political theory. More specifically, I am interested in exploring ways in which all manner of urban political phenomena could be privileged as an object of inquiry by critical political theory, in order to uncover how certain urban discourses contribute to the reproduction of urban injustice. As it stands now, political theory in general is largely disassociated with specifically urban concerns for several reasons that I outline in the body of this book. As a goal, urbanizing critical political theory is not an entirely novel endeavour, but it is certainly quite rare. Political theorist Warren Magnusson has, for example, devoted much of his career to such an enterprise, although his approach is not oriented toward privileging the city as a site of politics, but more so as a way of breaking the hegemony of studying politics through a state-centric lens. Iris Marion Young is another important political theorist who has contributed to urbanizing the discipline. Her work in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* demonstrates how the city holds out the best hope for moving away from identarian politics and toward a "politics of difference." And in a localist-republican manner, Benjamin Barber asserts that democracy can be practised in its strongest form at the municipal level. Despite their influence in the field, these

urban-oriented political theorists are very much the exception, and not the rule in political science.

While I am heavily indebted to these disciplinary trailblazers, my theorizing of the city is clearly distinct from their work in several ways. First, my research is committed to thinking about urban political struggles in the Schmittian/Mouffian tradition, wherein the "political" is defined as an antagonistic realm of exclusions and aspirations to hegemony. This is starkly contrasted with the elusive and ever-shifting conception of politics that characterizes much of urban critical political theory today. Second, I rely heavily on Lacanian psychoanalytic theories in order to understand political phenomena. In this respect, the work of Slavoj Žižek looms large in the text, projected onto the urban level of analysis in a way that, as far as I know, no one has attempted before now. I contend that in the same manner that Žižek has politicized Lacan by bringing his work out of the clinic, one can "urbanize" Lacanian categories like jouissance, desire, and drive, by incorporating them into a theory of the politicized city. Third, moving away from the abstract-theoretical realm, the new politicized conception of the city I develop in this book is encapsulated by the category of "common property." I argue that when cities, and more importantly neighbourhoods, are approached by residents and activists as common property, actual empirical struggles for control over urban space, or social justice in the city, is strengthened and made intelligible within a social system dominated by private property and market relations. More than anything, my approach to understanding the city, and my normative position regarding progressive urban activism, may strike the reader as highly counter-intuitive. This is because I aim to challenge most of the prevailing left-wing, progressive, or critical assumptions regarding the good life, as well as the values of democracy, inclusivity, and openness. If the city is to be conceptualized as a properly political site of antagonism and struggle, I believe that this requires embracing correspondingly antagonist tactics and exclusionary collective self-identification.

What is it about the city that makes it deserving of such a privileged place in the eyes of critical political theory? This is the point in the introduction of any good urbanist volume when the author lists the multitude of reasons why cities are so important today. It is difficult to find a piece of academic writing on the theme of cities or urban space published in the past 10 years, which does not begin with the observation that over half the world's population now lives in cities. This is, indeed, a historical event of world-changing magnitude and a development worthy of a paradigm shift in social science research. Therefore, with this demographic observation out of the way, we can move on to other reasons why cities are so very important and should be treated as the central site of political and other social-scientific research.

It has long been assumed in academic and policy-making circles that the nation-state is the site of the highest level of politics. This is because the nation-state is defined by the most authentic and determinate form of political power: sovereignty. No other collective actors share this mystical, yet binding, type of authority, and therefore the nation-state is considered the supreme political actor that may or may not devolve power to subsidiary bodies. This long-standing

assumption of the pre-eminence of the nation-state is now eroding in the face of several phenomena, none greater than globalization which is largely seen as a process that limits and dilutes sovereignty via free trade agreements, globalized market forces, and transnational political institutions. This process is no better observed than in the context of genuinely global environmental problems like climate change. While virtually all nation-states acknowledge the threat of increasing global temperatures, they have been largely ineffectual in confronting it. Regardless of whether this failure has been due to the inability to agree to an international plan, or because states have simply not been able to meet emissions-reduction targets, nation-states simply have not been up to the task of tackling climate change.

The ineffectiveness of nation-states is mirrored in international institutions – the UN, EU, WTO – that many had hoped would develop into bodies capable of overcoming international anarchy and the problems associated with the parochialisms enabled by sovereignty. This brings us to the first claim regarding the importance of cities: increasingly they have been compelled to take on leadership roles in tackling global or national problems by enacting their own legislation relevant to important issues. In some ways this is nothing new. It was the cities of medieval Europe, and not the nations or kingdoms in which they were situated, that had to devise creative solutions to specifically urban problems, like waste disposal and access to potable water. More recently, Barber has argued that cities like New York are now initiating their own programs to fight manifold issues including climate change, gun control, and health problems (e.g., Bloomberg's bold attempt to ban over-sized soda containers in order to deal with New York's obesity epidemic).[3] Finally, in rapidly ascendant China, the Communist Party has established urbanization as the central policy intended to reduce poverty and inequality. In the Chinese economy, most well-paying jobs are found in cities and by encouraging rural Chinese to move to them, the government hopes that poverty will be decreased in absolute terms. This urbanization strategy, by all accounts, has succeeded in achieving these policy goals, while allowing China to become the industrial superpower it is today.

Such a shift in legislative initiatives across the world is not only symptomatic of the diminishing power of nation-states, but also the rising power of some cities. This is illustrated by former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg who hinted at the state-like powers of his mega-city when he declared: "I have my own army in the NYPD ... my own State Department."[4] The sheer size of cities and their tax-bases, along with an imperative to be innovative in the face of ever-dwindling federal and provincial (or state) funding to cities, combined with the offloading of responsibilities from more prominent levels of government, creates greater autonomy for cities. As cities become more autonomous and owe less to the largesse of higher levels of government, it should be no surprise if cities in the future increasingly demand more *formal* independence. This sort of discourse is already emerging, at least in North America.[5] Six years ago, in an interview with the *Globe and Mail*, Canadian television-producer Chris Haddock explored the idea that Vancouver should consider assuming the role of a city-state, bypassing its relationship with Victoria, and dealing directly with Ottawa as an

"individual economic and cultural entity."[6] Alan Broadbent has made similar overtures in respect to Canada's three biggest cities – Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto – all of which, he suggests, could thrive as independent provinces (at the very least, he argues, they should be given special taxation/revenue-producing powers).[7] And Barber explores the idea of the world being run by a council of mayors, arguing that at the municipal level mayors can pass legislation politically unfeasible at higher levels and that such a council would govern effectively because mayors tend to be less ideological and more pragmatic than their national counterparts.[8] While not all cities have the capacity for self-rule like Vancouver and New York might, in a world of 28 mega-cities with metropolitan populations over 10 million, 423 cities with between one and 10 million residents, and another 372 with between 500,000 and one million residents, there is no reason to believe that cities could not effectively assume responsibility for some state-like powers.[9]

If the spirits of critics of the nation-state system are buoyed by the paradigm-changing potential cities possess for governance, there is also reason to fear for our collective urbanized future. Cities are facing great challenges to their flourishing and sustainability. Mike Davis, for example, has shown that a significant portion of the globe's over 3.5 billion urban residents live in vast slums on the outskirts of the world's largest cities.[10] As of 2010, the UN estimated that 33 percent of urban residents in the developing world live in such squalid conditions, and although the UN met its Millennium Development Goal by helping 225 million residents move out of slums well before its 2020 deadline, the overall global slum population nonetheless increased from 776.7 million in 2000 to 827.6 million in 2010.[11] Many of these slum dwellers lack access to clean water and satisfactory sanitary facilities.[12] The growing problem of slums is indicative of the changing character of global inequality, long associated most starkly with the urban–rural divide. A new mounting concern in urban areas is their *internal* socio-economic inequality. Connectedly, anyone who follows the news pertaining to global unrest, reflected in the seemingly endless string of protests directed at national governments over the past 15 years, cannot ignore its strikingly urban character. Whether it is Bangkok, Istanbul, New York, Caracas, or Kiev, the protests have been organized in and facilitated by urban spaces, even if the aims of the protestors are often national in scope.[13] Viewing these conflicts through an urban lens helps explain subsequent national developments that may otherwise appear inexplicable.

Take the 2011 street protests in Cairo as an example. The narrative created to explain them, at least for Western observers, was that the protesters were made up mostly of young, well-educated, and relatively secular individuals and groups seeking an end to government corruption and the establishment of a more democratic political system. This was greatly encouraging for pro-democracy reformers in the Middle East, and portrayed an unfamiliar image of the Arab world for many Westerners accustomed only to associating countries in this region with terrorism and religious fundamentalism. It must have been confusing for many Western onlookers, therefore, when the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi was elected as president, after Hosni Mubarak was finally

deposed. The image of the progressive protesters we all witnessed on television simply did not conform to the perceived conservative religiosity of Morsi and the Brotherhood. While this is only speculative on my part, two plausible explanations (among others) for the dissonance between fact and representation of the Egyptian protests occur to me immediately. First, and most intuitively, the major Western media simply misrepresented who the protestors were. Instead of a democratic aspirational middle-class revolution, the revolt against Mubarak was much more popularly widespread and included a much greater conservative, anti-democratic element than the media portrayed. However, what if the intelligibility problem of interpreting the ostensible inconsistencies of this event is due to an inappropriate territorial framing of the situation? When the casual Western spectator tries to make sense of the events leading up to Morsi's election, they understand them as an *Egyptian* phenomenon, instead of a protest for and by the residents of *Cairo*. When watching CNN coverage of the Cairo protests, it is easy to forget that Egypt is a huge, primarily rural,[14] and overall religiously conservative country. Much like cities the world over, the collective population of Cairo is much more progressive, secular, and attuned to Western political ideals than is the general Egyptian population. In a way, it seems intuitive that we would know this. Most people are consciously aware that a cultural and political divide exists between the urban and rural areas in their own countries, so why do they assume it is different elsewhere? But perhaps they don't assume such a difference. What if, instead, the intelligibility problem is that we consume media reports about foreign events through an implicitly nation-state-centric lens?

Whatever might account for the difficulties of interpreting political conflicts, it should be no surprise that academia has shown an ever-increasing concern with all questions dealing with the city and urban space. This is most pronounced in the social sciences and humanities, where the topic of "the city" appears to be becoming the early twenty-first-century equivalent to the 1990s' "globalization" as a buzzword signifying the "sexiness" of a topic that will make it into the title of thousands of MA and PhD theses, conference papers, and scholarly articles. Various (non-scientific) database keyword searches of "urban theory" and "the city" support this claim, by showing a marked increase of the terms in scholarly publications.[15]

Indeed, there is a certain "hipness" to urban studies, as a generation of scholars have begun to appreciate the perceived authenticity and excitement of living in the inner city. In this regard, the last few generations have come to perceive a contrast between the vitality of urban life and the stale, culturally arid environs of their parents' suburbs. As a latter-day Jane Jacobs, Richard Florida has detected this growing appreciation for the cultural amenities and opportunities on offer in the city, not only amongst academics, but also to a much broader "creative class" of artists, designers, computer programmers, and so on. Arguably the singularly most influential theorist on planners and urban policy-makers over the past 10 years, Florida has made urbanism mainstream with a series of best-selling books that both describe changing urban tastes among the well-educated and upwardly mobile, and how cities can satisfy them. Florida's ideas

have become almost hegemonic within most planning and policy circles, as cities become more and more committed to doing whatever it takes to attract the creative class. Density, diversity, tolerance, and culture: these are the new characteristics and values that drive contemporary urbanism.

This cultural shift toward the desirability of urban living is a double-edged sword. On the progressive edge of the sword, because the influential force that is the creative class (along with the current generation of city planners) has recognized both the cultural and logistical merits of urban living, cities are able to finally implement, with little resistance, plans for densifying downtowns, encouraging greater reliance on public transit and other alternative forms of transportation to the private car, pedestrianize streets, and zone for mixed-use neighbourhoods. In short, municipal politicians are finally able to create the kind of liveable cities that Jane Jacobs envisioned over 50 years ago in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. The progressive potential of this urban moment should not be underestimated. The wholesale redesign of major metropolitan areas will have a profound impact on, not just ecological sustainability and infrastructural innovation, but also the very nature of human sociability and subjectivity. As David Harvey declares, "The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire."[16] In other words, determining what kind of cities we build is simultaneously the determination of *who* we want to be. But this future is far from written and the question of *how* these changes will impact our collective development as a species, will be in part determined through political struggle.

The inevitability of political conflict over the future of our cities is due to the other edge of the urban sword: the capitalist appropriation of the desire for urban living and revitalization. While Jacobs's and other progressive urbanists' visions for liveable neighbourhoods is driven by a spirit of the public good and the ideal of citizens creating their cities by voluntary, democratic practices, the reality of inner-city revitalization is that it has become guided largely by rent-seeking capital and in the interest of economic growth. In 1976, Harvey Molotch famously identified this problem when he theorized cities as "growth machines."[17] He shows how all places can be understood as commodities that exist at the intersection of use- and exchange-value. A place has use-value to the extent it is inhabited by human beings who use it, whether as a place to sleep, eat, work, or play. But such places also have financial value to the extent they are exchangeable in the market and/or they produce rents. While use-value contributes to the determination of exchange-value, from the perspective of capitalism the exchange-value of any particular commodity is more or less divorced from its use-value. In an elaboration of the growth machine thesis, Logan and Molotch claim that in terms of conceptualizing cities, exchange-value has become the primary determinant of planning policies. This, they argue, is illustrated by the hegemony of "growth" as the primary policy goal of municipal governments. Logan and Molotch demonstrate that whatever differences exist between rival politicians or municipal political parties, the one principle they all agree on is that achieving economic growth is the priority for their cities, and