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Ronan Paddison on public space and the post-political

Abstract

In this brief contribution I engage with Ronan Paddison's work on urban public space and the post-political to highlight how it moves beyond the polarization that marks much of the ongoing debate around post-politics in Anglophone academia. Through a close reading of two of Paddison's texts – 'Protest in the Park: Preliminary Thoughts on the Silencing of Democratic Protest in the Neoliberal Age' and 'Questioning the end of public space: Reclaiming control of local banal spaces' co-authored with Jo Sharp – the article delineates three key propositions in his engagement with the post-political: a critical dialogical reading of the post-political thesis; a call for more nuanced empirical engagement; and an ability to draw from deep personal knowledge of and engagement with local urban politics. These three propositions, the article suggests, shape a generative engagement that has prefigured some of the work that added geographical and political nuance to the post-political debate. They also provide critical tools and pathways that can help illuminate how processes of (urban) post-politicization and (re-)politicization intersect and shape one another.

Keywords: Ronan Paddison, post-political, post-democracy, urban public space, end of public space

Summarizing Ronan Paddison's contributions to debates around urban public space and the post-political is a challenging task, particularly given the impressive oeuvre of his engagement with urban politics. It is also a task that is made perhaps more challenging by the (at times) heated debates that have marked recent geographical engagements with the (post-)political (see among others, Beveridge and Koch, 2017; Bond et al, 2015; Dikeç, 2017; Karaliotas, 2019; Larner, 2014; MacLeod, 2011; Swyngedouw 2009; 2018). Nevertheless, for me, the invitation to reflect on Ronan Paddison's work on the post-political was also a valuable opportunity to return to a text – 'Protest in the Park: Preliminary Thoughts on the Silencing of Democratic Protest in the Neoliberal Age' (Paddison, 2009) – that I have devoured during my PhD on '*The Post-Democratic City?*'. And this return has helped me realize that I haven't fully appreciated the depth and scope of Paddison's contribution to the debate when I first read the text.

I would argue, however, that contemporary debates around the post-political in Anglophone geography have also still not fully appreciated and developed Paddison's contribution and approach. As I aim to argue in this short piece, Paddison's intervention – particularly when read together with his work on urban public space – provides critical

tools and pathways for moving beyond the polarization that has marked much of the ongoing debate on the post-political. More specifically, much of the post-political debate has been dominated by differing and diverging diagnoses on whether or not we are indeed living in a post-political configuration – in societies where democratic debate and disagreement are institutionally and discursively silenced and marginalized. Paddison's writings, on the contrary, provide for a generative way of engaging with a different, more nuanced, complex and exciting question: to explore how 'radically different types of democratic and anti-democratic practice and relationships' (Paddison and Sharp, 2007: 98) are making and remaking urban public spaces, politics and urban everyday life more broadly. In this sense, Paddison's work also prefigured some of the later contributions to the debate that have sought to add geographical and political nuance to accounts of post-politicization and post-democratization.

In order to flesh out the key propositions that drive this exploration and shape Paddison's contributions to debates on the post-political, I will be limiting my engagement to two of his key texts on the topic. The first is the one I have already mentioned, 'Protest in the Park' (Paddison, 2009), one of the early explorations and reflections on the post-politicization of urban politics in Anglophone geography. The second is an article co-authored with Jo Sharp on 'Questioning the end of public space: Reclaiming control of local banal spaces' (Paddison and Sharp, 2007). Brought together these texts, I aim to demonstrate, contribute toward an important analytical shift in debates around post-politics and/or the end of public space. A shift that challenges the totalizing and asphyxiating image of urban politics transpired in some accounts of post-politics (see Millington, 2016) and the end of public space (see Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 2017), but does not dismiss the analytical purchase of the two theses. Rather, it seeks to turn them into critical analytical tools in making sense of the struggles and stubborn complexity of urban everyday life and in search for a more democratic urban politics.

Three key elements drive this exploration and reflection and arguably much of Paddison's work more broadly. Firstly, an ability to move beyond a yes or no position in the debate – be that of the post-political city (see Swyngedouw, 2007; 2009) or the end of urban public space (see Sorkin, 1992; Mitchell, 1995) – and develop a critical distance that enables him, while having disagreements and critiques toward the thesis, to also appreciate its analytical purchase and critically mobilize it; an ability to develop a *critical*

dialogue with the proposition. Secondly, together with this dialogical reading, Paddison's work is also marked by an insistence that 'the argument needs empiricising more fully, particularly where contingency is acknowledged as key to identifying how the practice of urban governance unfolds' (Paddison, 2009: para. 6). This call for empiricizing is not just an insistence on data gathering per se, but more importantly a call to explore how historical and geographic specificities shape processes of post-politicization. Thirdly, Paddison's interventions in these debates are also marked by his deep knowledge of and active engagement with Glasgow's everyday life and urban politics; an academic intervention informed by and also informing an active engagement with local urban politics. So, a call for a scholarship of presence as well (Kaika, 2018); a scholarship that stems from and also informs a personal engagement with urban politics. In what follows, I turn to the each of the two texts I have mentioned above in some more detail to further explore these three propositions.

The manufacturing of consent and the marginalization of protest in the post-political city

Let me start with the article with which I opened, Paddison's 'Protest in the Park: Preliminary Thoughts on the Silencing of Democratic Protest in the Neoliberal Age' first published in *L'Espace Politique* in 2009 and later in an edited version in *Variant* (2010). Following on from Erik Swyngedouw's groundbreaking contributions on the post-political and the post-democratic city (2007; 2009), this was one of the early interventions in what in human geography and urban studies came to be called the post-political city debate. Engaging in detail with the polyphony that marks the post-political debate is beyond the scope of this brief intervention, so let me brutally summarize to contextualize Paddison's text. Drawing on a range of political theorists including Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Rancière, Erik Swyngedouw has vigorously argued that the urban is a key terrain in and through which a post-political and post-democratic arrangement of politics proliferates (2007; 2009; 2011). For Swyngedouw, at the beginning of the 21st century, transformations of urban governance in the Global North signal a new post-political arrangement 'characterized by the rise of a neoliberal governmentality that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement,

accountancy metrics and technocratic management' (2007: 58; see also 2009; 2018). The key proposition in the post-political and post-democratic city argument, then, is that consensus politics colonizes the horizon of urban politics foreclosing the expression and appearance of political disagreement.

Against this background, the opening pages of Paddison's text are indicative of the three key modes of intervention in the debate I outlined above. 'On a crisp morning in March 2008', the text opens, 'I took part in a demonstration against a proposal to install a novel recreational facility proposed for a major park in Glasgow' (Paddison, 2009: para 1). This is indeed an unusual starting point for a reflection on the silencing of democratic protest, let alone the complete disavowal of politics that strong variations of the post-political thesis transpire. Having described the 'motley crew' that gathered to protest the construction of the Go Ape recreational facility in Glasgow's Pollok Park, the staging of the protest to coincide with a visit by city officials and the ways in which protesters were ignored and silenced during the city officials' tour in the proposed area for the facility; Paddison himself acknowledges so:

'Clearly, the protest against the Go Ape proposal as the performance of resistance is itself an oxymoron to the post-political thesis. Further, as an historical glance over the last few decades would show the Go Ape protest was just one of a myriad of oppositions that have bubbled up in Glasgow, just as they do in any city, to challenge how the city is to be reconstructed and more generally the policy orthodoxy' (Paddison, 2009: para 5). But this, the continuous (re-)emergence of politics, contestation and protest is not seen as grounds to reject the analytical purchase of the post-political thesis altogether – as many other interventions in the debate actually do – but as a springboard to turn the thesis into a critical analytical tool in seeking to answer a different and more nuanced question: 'why, and what strategies have been adopted by ruling elites to ensure that government is projected through consensus?' (Paddison, 2009: para 5).

This shift of emphasis enables Paddison to develop two key propositions with regards to the marginalization – and the use of the word marginalization instead of evacuation is important here – of democratic politics in the city. Firstly, that urban entrepreneurialism in its re-organization and disciplining of urban governance into 'an assumption that abstaining from competitive urbanism was neither an economic nor a political option' (Paddison, 2009: para 7) has indeed colonized the horizon of local urban politics. In this, urban entrepreneurial strategies, have, thus, become the common sense

of the day around which consensus is manufactured (see also Swyngedouw, 2009; Davidson and Iveson, 2015 for similar arguments). Importantly, however, this is an argument that Paddison develops by briefly tracing the trajectory of British urban politics from the Victorian to the Fordist to the post-industrial city of the present day. This serves to historicize the exploration of the hypothesis of the emergence of a post-political configuration. This is part of what I highlighted in my introduction as ‘the need for empiricising’ and it is through this move that Paddison firmly locates the emergence of consensus politics in the trajectory of New Labour in Britain. Consensus politics or post-politics, he insists, following Chantal Mouffe (2005), is not the end of politics; ‘[r]ather, post-politics refers to the emergence of managerial consensus politics which for New Labour had its conceptual foundations in Third Way resolutions’ (Paddison, 2009: para 13). This is, indeed, a more nuanced as well as historically and geographically specific articulation of the post-political thesis than the generalizations found in some of the work around post-politics.

Importantly, this is not done without a critical distance from the thesis. On the contrary, Paddison remains critical in terms of key aspects of the post-political argument. As he puts it, the post-political thesis is problematic in that ‘it undervalues the role of human agency and of resistance in being able to challenge consensus politics’ (para 19; see also Featherstone, 2009). However, this critical distance also leads him to highlight how ‘the value of the thesis is in its ability to provide clues as to how ‘the protest in the park’ was marginalized by the representatives of the city council as beyond the boundaries of consensus politics’ (Paddison, 2009: para 19). This is a crucial intervention that turns much of the debate around the post-political city on its head; moving away from the dry question of whether or not we live in a post-political city and instead turning to post-politics as an analytical tool in understanding how democratic politics are marginalized by the dominant order to, of course, always return to haunt it.

How then have urban politics and protest become relatively rare occurrences, Paddison asks? To respond to this question, the paper introduces its second analytical proposition namely, that a neo-populist political discourse has been mobilized to socially and politically cement the virtues of consensus politics. Paddison develops this in dialogue with Swyngedouw’s account of urban (neo-)populism (2009; 2010), but also problematizing it through drawing from Latin American experiences. In doing so, he

delineates how talk of “the city” and “the people” constructs the perceived need for a city-wide response to the existential – but importantly external – threat that urban competition in a globalizing economy is posing for cities. This then quickly leads to the consensual promotion of allegedly win-win solutions for all urban dwellers articulated around empty signifiers like the healthy, the cultural, the European, the smart, the sustainable city and so on (Gunder and Hillier, 2016). Contextualizing the discussion in British urban politics again, the article palpably demonstrates how New Labour’s insistence on community and community participation has become a straight-jacket wherein the key policy coordinates are always already decided – along the lines of urban entrepreneurialism – before participation is invited. And how, thus, talk and performance of community participation has become a key element of urban governmentality.

It is against this analytical backdrop that Paddison contextualizes the protest in the park in the rich history of urban politics in Glasgow and describes the armature of ‘techniques of consensual persuasion’ working toward its marginalization (Paddison, 2009: para 36). In this, he convincingly demonstrates how a Labour dominated Glasgow City Council supported the Go Ape development proposal as an integral part of its unconditional adoption of an urban entrepreneurial ethos. An ethos evident in Glasgow since the 1980s from the early days of the ‘Glasgow Miles Better’ city marketing campaign (Paddison, 1993) to the European Capital of Culture 1990 (*ibid.*) to the 2014 Commonwealth Games and the continuous – up to the present day – bidding for sports and cultural mega-events. It is this entrepreneurial logic that makes projects like the Go Ape facility near unquestionable in the local political agenda, Paddison argues, clearly linking the development of the recreational facility with Glasgow City Council’s ‘Glasgow as a healthy city to live in’ strategy (Paddison, 2009: para 30). Within a political horizon thus constructed, when the entrepreneurial proposal for the Go Ape facility was confronted with protest in the park, the City Council would resort to a variety of tactics in order to delegitimize and silence dissensus. These, Paddison documents, revolved around a combination of tokenistic participation in the form of community questionnaires asking generic questions on the improvement of park facilities coupled with the outright ignoring of the protesters on the day of the protest.

It is, therefore, through maintaining a critical distance and a dialogical attitude toward the post-political thesis, empiricizing the argument and bringing in his personal engagement and deep knowledge of Glasgow urban politics, that Paddison mobilizes the post-political thesis as a critical analytical tool. This critical tool, in turn, informs a geographically and politically nuanced interrogation of 'how the state is accommodating [neoliberal] shifts and [their] impact on democratic processes in the city' (Paddison, 2009: para 37), to use the paper's concluding sentence. Arguably, then, Paddison's intervention can be said to have prefigured some of the later work that has sought to add geographical and political nuance to the exploration of post-politicization and post-democratization. Indeed, similar modes of enquiry can be discerned in work that has sought to unpack the different modes and tactics of de-politicization at play in different geographical contexts (van Puymbroeck and Oosterlynck, 2014) or to trace the actually existing geographies of post-politicization (Raco and Lin, 2012) by exploring the situated and contingent armature of tactics that are mobilized to silence political disagreement (see, for example, Baeten, 2009; Thomas, 2017). And the same goes for accounts that have sought to document and analyze the always contingent and contested unfolding of processes of post-democratization and the uneven geographies in and through which these operate (see, for example, Doucette and Koo, 2016; Karaliotas, 2019).

Reclaiming democratic control over banal public spaces in challenging the post-political closure

The question of how neoliberal shifts are accommodated by local governments and the impacts this has on democratic processes in the city, is also the key leitmotiv in the second paper I want to briefly discuss, namely Paddison's 'Questioning the end of public space: Reclaiming control of local banal spaces' co-authored with Jo Sharp and published in the *Scottish Geographical Journal* a couple of years before 'Protest in the Park' (Paddison and Sharp, 2007). While I have tried to elaborate on what for me are the three key propositions of Paddison's contribution to debates on urban public space and the post-political focusing exclusively on 'Protest in the Park' up until now, a reading of 'Questioning the End of Public Space' has also been informing all of the points I made above. Indeed, the debate this paper seeks to intervene in – that around the eroding effects of neoliberal urban governance on public space – is quite closely related with

questions around (urban) democracy and the expression of political disagreement. What I want to add drawing from this paper is how Paddison's work also offered important insights on how we might move toward a more *democratic public space*. Or perhaps, to put it in terms similar to those of the post-political debate, how human agency and resistance can challenge and shape the post-political scripting of urban politics.

Before doing so, let me briefly summarize the thrust of the debate around the end of public space (for comprehensive reviews see Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 2017). Since the early 1990s, a wide-ranging debate on the question of 'the end of (urban) public space' and what this means for the making of just and democratic cities is unfolding. Michael Sorkin's introduction to '*Variations of a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*' effectively summarizes the stakes of the debate:

The familiar spaces of traditional cities, the streets and square, courtyards and parks, are our great scenes of the civic, visible and accessible, our binding agents. (...) As spatiality ebbs, so does intimacy. The privatized city of bits is a lie, simulating its connections, obliterating the power of its citizens either to act alone or to act together. (Sorkin, 1992, p. xv)

In this line of argument, the neoliberal re-making of urban spaces is argued to be closing down public space through 'the pressurizing forces of order, quality-of-life and protest policing, and privatization (in its many guises)' (Mitchell, 2017: 507). Indeed, research in this tradition – often in dialogue with David Harvey's influential analysis of urban entrepreneurialism (1989) – has documented how the proliferation of shopping malls, gated communities, flagship projects, plazas, regenerated waterfronts and so on is selectively targeted to specific groups of users and interests, constructing 'a public realm stripped of accessibility and visibility' for all (Madden, 2010: 190). It has, in other words, analyzed how neoliberal urban restructuring 'is defined by the logics of commodification and the need to establish order, the imprint of which is made apparent through the privatization of public space and the spread of new measures for its control' (Paddison and Sharp, 2007: 88). Building on this, this body of work has sought to question and criticize the implications of such restructuring for urban inclusion and democratic politics. In a move similar to the one I described above with regards to post-politics, Paddison's and Sharp's article maintains a critical distance from accounts that tell the

story of the complete erosion of public space in late neoliberalism. Rather, they seek to offer a more nuanced and context-specific analysis of the competing democratic and anti-democratic practices making and re-making urban public space in Glasgow. Once again, this is not done at the expense of the urgency and analytical purchase of work that demonstrates how the commodification, privatization and the remaking of our cities in the image of urban entrepreneurialism are indeed limiting the accessibility and inclusivity of urban public space (Paddison and Sharp, 2007; for Glasgow see also MacLeod, 2002). Rather, the key analytical move for Paddison and Sharp is to draw a distinction – albeit always porous – between the central spaces of the city core that are dominated by flagship developments and privatized public spaces and what they call local banal spaces: spaces in urban neighborhoods outside the core; public spaces that lie at the interstices and perhaps outwith the urban entrepreneurial gaze – but, of course, being influenced by it.

Conceptually, the paper draws on the work of Iris Marion Young (2000) and Hannah Arendt (1958) to highlight the fragility of public space and the importance of accessibility and inclusivity in the making of democratic public space. Empirically, it zooms in on the different experiences of two inner-city neighborhoods in Glasgow: Govanhill and East Pollokshields. More specifically, the article analyzes the protests against the closure of Govanhill Baths and the opening of the Hidden Gardens, a new space dedicated to peace and multicultural relations, in East Pollokshields. In doing so, Paddison and Sharp offer an empirically rich and analytically nuanced account of how democratic and anti-democratic process are making and remaking urban public space. Reflecting on the failure of resistances to stop the closure of the Govanhill baths but also on the relative success of the Hidden Gardens project in fostering a more inclusive and participatory process of producing urban public space with communities, Paddison and Sharp highlight ‘the messiness of local public space wars [and] their ability to generate divisions within the local communities’ (2007: 102). Returning, thus, to their opening distinction between core and banal city spaces, they conclude:

‘the capacity of elites to imprint their representation of space in the core and other spaces in the city becomes challenged locally in the banal spaces of the city in which agency is able to assert itself more as a collective force’ (Paddison and Sharp, 2007: 103).

It is this articulation of local resistances and agency that always returns to haunt the totalizing and asphyxiating scripting of contemporary urban public space. But the articulation of local agency and resistances does not mean that urban public space – local or otherwise – are immune to processes of post-politicization. It rather foregrounds the need to unpack ‘the different types of democratic and anti-democratic practice and relationships’ that produce and reproduce public space (Paddison and Sharp, 2007: 98).

Conclusion

In a recent article, Don Mitchell returns to debates around the end of public space (2017) – almost twenty-five years after his initial influential intervention (Mitchell, 1995). The end of public space, Mitchell insists in his recent intervention, is never a complete project (2017; see also Madden, 2010). Rather, the end of public space, he argues, ‘is always a tendency (though definitely a contradictory one) within capitalist urban economies’ (Mitchell, 2017: 508). For him, this suggests both the need to acknowledge and analyze this tendency but also to engage with public space as a contested site; it calls ‘for a careful appraisal of the ends of public space: how public spaces are deployed socially, strategically, ideologically, as well as how they are used by myriad publics — the ends to which they are put’ (Mitchell, 2017: 503). The key task for Mitchell, then, is to interrogate ‘how the tendency towards the end of public space (and opposition to that tendency) shapes the ends of public space, historically, in the present, and in the future’ (2017: 508). In a similar line of argument, Erik Swyngedouw has repeatedly insisted on the contingent and contested nature of the post-political and post-democratic scripting of our cities and on the politicizing potentialities of urban environments (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2009; 2011; 2018). As he recently put it, the analytical purchase of the post-political thesis rests with ‘its performativity as a critical tool for conceptualizing contemporary processes of de-politicization and re-politicization’ (Swyngedouw, 2018: xv). The analytical task, then, Swyngedouw argues, is ‘thinking of de-politicization and re-politicization together as two interlinked yet profoundly different processes’ (2018: 1).

Indeed, since 2011 urban public space has been marked by the return of new forms of politicization. Tahrir Square in Cairo, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Plaza de la

Cataluña in Barcelona, Syntagma Square in Athens, Zuccotti Park in New York, Taksim Square in Istanbul and many more central squares and core public spaces across the globe became the sites for urban uprisings. Protesters have reclaimed core urban spaces from their scripting by the logics of capital and order to turn them into sites of democratic disagreement and experimentation with new modes of being and acting in-common (see among many others, Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017; Erensu and Karaman, 2017; Karaliotas, 2017). The dynamics of urban re-politicization, however, are not limited to these spectacular and fleeting moments of rupture in core urban spaces. Taking a look at the banal local spaces of neighborhoods – as Paddison and Sharp (2007) urge us to do – would reveal how a multitude of grassroots urban movements continue to challenge the dominant ordering of our cities through everyday acts of politicization, solidarity and care in the interstices and cracks of the dominant ordering (see, for example, Arampatzi, 2017; Garcia-Lamarca, 2017). And yet, such urban re-politicization processes are also met with a vast and variegated armature of silencing tactics – ranging from outright and brutal repression by the police to efforts of co-optation – insisting on effacing democratic disagreement and creativity from the partitioning of the urban sensible. Rather than signaling the need to dismiss the post-political thesis, then, such processes of re-politicization point to how processes of post-democratization and democratic politics encounter, intersect with, and shape one another (Karaliotas, 2019)

And this re-affirms the urgency of engaging with the question that Paddison's interventions in the post-political and the end of public space debates put centre stage: how democratic and anti-democratic processes are making and remaking not just public space but urban politics and life more broadly. I think this question aptly summarizes Paddison's mode of enquiry and pivotal contribution in these debates: a sober call for a dialogical, critical, and empirically nuanced geography of the ways in which the neoliberal onslaught is eroding (urban) democracy but, crucially, one that registers how human agency and resistance will always challenge the script. I am, thus, convinced that debates and future research around the post-political and public space in geography, urban studies and beyond will have a lot to gain from a return to Ronan Paddison's oeuvre.

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