

# Seeing democracy like a city

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## Abstract

Urbanisation is changing landscapes, social relations and everyday lives across the globe. But urbanisation is also changing the ways democracy is understood and practiced. Nevertheless, the relation between urbanisation and democracy remains conceptually and empirically underdeveloped. Our aim in this paper is to provide a novel way of thinking about this relationship that addresses two limitations in current debates. First, there is the dominant view that just as urbanisation dissolves the actual, material city it also dissolves the city as a democratic project. We challenge this understanding, arguing that across the globe claims for and forms of urban collective self-rule signal that the city retains democratic significance in a very specific sense: as an object of practice and thought the city is a source and stake of the urban demos. Second, there is a tendency to either restrict the question of democracy to state-centred forms of political action or to place democracy completely outside the realm of the state. We argue however that urbanisation unsettles seemingly fixed boundaries between the state and society and thus opens the possibility of weaving together a new democratic fabric encompassing both. In addressing these two strands of debate together, we outline a democratic politics of urbanisation that shifts perspectives from institutions to practices, from jurisdictional scales to spaces of collective urban life. Seeing democracy like a city, we argue, foregrounds a way to reimagine and to re-locate democracy in the everyday lives of urbanites.

## Keywords

Democracy, urbanisation, politics, city, urban

## Introduction

This article claims that the city can offer a horizon of democracy, one distinct from institutions of the nation-state. This might seem like a bold claim, even to some urbanists, aware of the immense force of global capital on urbanity and the enduring allure of the nation. We assert, however, that there is a productive relation between urbanisation and democracy. To grasp its potential, we need different analytical lenses to those usually applied to democracy and to overcome

something of a disconnect in urban research. While prominent scholars, from contrasting stances (Barnett, 2014; Glaeser & Steinberg, 2018; Purcell, 2022; Swyngedouw, 2018), have engaged with the relation between the ‘urban’ and democracy, there has not

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been a concerted effort to build a conceptual bridge between democracy and urbanisation. To do this, we draw on strands of the radical democracy tradition, in which democracy is, simply put, a continuing project of collective self-government: of the people (the demos) coming together to discover themselves as political subjects in the development of collective decision-making (Tønder & Thomassen, 2005). We draw on diverse strands of work in urban research, which speak to a democracy conceived in these terms, albeit in rather different registers and vocabularies when thinking about collective urban action and the ways in which urbanisation can be understood as a horizon along which this action takes place. Taken together, these strands of work help us see democracy like a city.

There is an undeniable urgency to think about urbanisation in democratic terms. State-centred democracy is increasingly questioned, while diverse claims to democracy, are increasingly situated in urban areas (Beissinger, 2022). Sometimes the urban acts as a stage for general demands but it is striking how far urban space has become a source and stake of democracy. The housing movements of recent times, the anti-austerity movements of southern Europe, Occupy, have all been engaged with how urban space is used to limit democracy and how it can be emancipated for collective gain (Vilenica et al., 2020; Lancione, 2019; Della Porta et al., 2017). Similarly, the ‘new municipalism’ has attracted much attention with its prospect of positioning towns and cities as the locations for a reimagining of democratic politics, most prominently in Barcelona from the 2010s onwards (Russell, 2019). This movement itself draws on the urban democratic experiments of earlier decades in Latin America (Baiocchi, 2018; Holston, 2009).

This growing urbanisation of politics should come within a context of political and democratic crisis. It is surely an affront to democracy that we have, including in formally (liberal) democratic systems, so little capacity to control the places we inhabit, to act together on the processes which shape our daily lives. State-centred politics can seem distant and disenchanting, as many scholars have pointed out (Torney, 2015; Wolin, 1981; Brown, 2017). Democracy is often, and speciously, thought to exist mainly in abstract rights, written constitutions, elections,

perhaps the occasional street protest, and a parliament. The health (or not) of democracy is, accordingly, measured in terms of the status of such political activities. Taken on its own terms, this form of politics seems to be in crisis, as many prominent political analysts suggest (Taylor, 2019; Streeck, 2016; Mair, 2013; Crouch, 2004). Key economic players have sought and gained competitive advantage over democratic systems, which increasingly appear to have given up on addressing the democratic deficits emerging from capitalism. Especially in global north contexts, we tend to associate democracy very closely with the state. But is the state, especially the nation-state, still the most viable location of democracy in the context of urbanisation? The state has – in principle but depending on the specific political system – enormous capacities, resources and vast competences to address social hardships in urban regions, such as poverty, mobility and energy inequalities, lack of health services or of affordable housing. But decades of scholarship point to its declining authority with its own subjects and increasing subservience to the interests of global capitalism.

Against a pessimistic reading of our time, namely that the democratic project collapses with the nation-state or that the nation-state dismantles democracy to reclaim sovereignty, we try to paint a more hopeful political horizon, one that asks not how we can re-align democracy to the authorities of the nation-state but whether there might be a more democratic way of doing politics. The inspiration for this move is both empirical and conceptual, resting on urban political practices and urban political thought. The former shows us flashes of an alternative democratic politics of collective everyday relations, spatial practices and the built environment. The latter helps us to detect and make sense of them. Concepts from urban research open up a horizon of democratic politics. Even if urban scholars are not directly developing a theory of democratic politics, we claim that their insights on urbanisation and urban collective action provide the lenses with which we can begin to piece together an urban understanding of democracy. Seeing democracy like a city involves the to-ing and fro-ing between concepts and practices. It opens new paths to relate processes of urbanisation to already

existing practices of democratic engagement and organising. Indeed, at the very core of our argument, is the conviction that we have to rethink and re-practice democracy through processes of urbanisation as they shape collective life.

In making these arguments the paper draws on diverse strands of urban scholarship. This is done in a spirit of ‘engaged pluralism’ (Barnes & Sheppard, 2010) where the overall aim is not to put forward a single perspective on democracy but to open up a space where scholars from diverse perspectives can engage further with ideas and debates on the urban conditions of politics and democracy. There is no doubt that further work should engage more substantively with issues of power, difference, inequality and the continuing capture of urban space by the market and the state, even as the numerous obstacles to and opponents of democracy are necessarily held back from our main account to allow space for our articulation of democracy’s urban conditions. A positive account of urban democracy emerges, but it is one grounded in a reading of the political practices found in many cities. These are not understood as providing empirical proof that urban(ised) democracy exists. Rather they point us, with the help of the analytical lenses we develop, to a different way of understanding and practicing democracy. The paper seeks to move beyond the view in urban geography that urbanisation not only dissolves the actual, material city but also the city as a democratic project (Wachsmuth, 2014; Madden, 2012; Roy, 2019). Further, it goes against the tendency to think of democratic politics in terms of a dualism between the state and opposing political forces emergent from society (for discussion, see Beveridge & Koch 2021). By contrast, seeing democracy like a city de-centres the state, urbanisation unsettles seemingly fixed boundaries between the state and society and thus opening up the possibility of weaving a new democratic fabric encompassing both (Boudreau, 2017; Magnusson 2011).

To be clear, the claim is not that urbanisation per se fosters democracy (regardless of how one defines democracy). Instead, our interest is in how urbanisation opens up different political conditions for democracy, opportunities as well as difficulties. The unruliness and messiness of urbanisation constantly

challenges the authoritative claims of government and public administrations that social life can be planned and steered towards a shared vision of the future. On a more conceptual level, urbanisation generates contradictions between spatial practices, modes of urban governance and urban everyday life. It produces objects of political contestation, agencies and practices of democratic politics that stand in constant tension with existing institutional orders and the state-democracy nexus (Barnett, 2014). How can we make sense of the tension that urbanisation undermines well-established categories of politics and democracy and at the same time generates ‘urban spaces as sites of democratic possibility’ (Ibid.: 1626)?

To connect urbanisation and democracy, this paper builds on some of the arguments developed in our book ‘How Cities Can Transform Democracy’ (Beveridge & Koch, 2022). Seeing democracy like a city necessitates some work on the city itself, namely its reassertion as a space for democratic projects. This does not imply a recall of the past democracy of the city-states of the European Middle Ages or even the city of Athens or Rome of the ancient period. Rather it entails a reflection of the direct invocations of many urbanites and to grasp the traction of the city as both an actual and virtual place, as *civitas* and *urbs* (Isin, 2007). In this sense, we reject the notion of the city as a bounded entity or a particular urban form or jurisdiction of political action. It is a category of political practice, not of geographical analysis. What emerges from our engagement is not per se an encompassing set of tactics and strategies from which we can then elaborate a definitive theoretical framework to kick-start democracy anew. Instead, we offer different ways of knowing democracy both as it is, and as it can become, in urban spaces. At the same time, we are convinced that the world we live in is far too messy to allow an all-embracing overview. Different perspectives are not only possible but also necessary to enhance democracy. Our own ideas of democracy are shaped by the practices we have seen as well as the scholarship we have engaged with. Hence, seeing democracy like a city is less an exercise in theorising democracy anew, of re-building foundations and more a response to the actions of urbanites across the globe. It is an epistemological

move in relation to democracy, a change in the terms of reference, which enables us to expand and enhance what is usually thought of as democracy.

The paper has the following sections. Section two details how urbanisation transforms the conditions of politics and democracy. Section three outlines how the *city* retains a democratic resonance. Section four makes the case for the project of the city in times of urbanisation. Section five concludes the paper with a consideration of the main implications of seeing democracy like a city.

### **How urbanisation transforms democratic politics**

How does urbanisation change democratic politics? How can we see democracy anew if we look at it through an urban lens? Urbanisation is a world-shaping process. It not only transforms infrastructures, buildings and landscapes but it also impacts on the ways people relate to and make sense of democratic politics. This means that urbanisation not only changes the conditions of politics and democracy but might lead to a shift in how people conceive of politics and democracy in the first place (Boudreau, 2017; Magnusson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2022). Before we dig deeper into this debate, a note on our understanding of urbanisation is required.

There are many ways to define urbanisation, but we see it as a process involving three conceptually distinct but empirically intertwined dimensions (see: Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Brenner, 2014; Lefebvre, 1991). First, the transformation and production of material and physical structures and elements. Urbanisation moves materials – it is constituted in and changes soils and lands, un/built environments and the social-spatial practices that sustain them. The second dimension is modes of collective decision-making and the rules, norms and relations of power that structure these modes. Urbanisation is a complex collective endeavour reliant on coordination, regulation and political legitimacy. At the same time, urbanisation often undermines or reshuffles existing ways of regulating and coordinating and leads to the emergence of new urban regimes, modes of governance or ‘new state spaces’ (Brenner, 2004). The third dimension is

related to the ways people experience and make sense of their urban environment. Urbanisation is felt, grasped through urban everyday lives, ‘lived space’ in Lefebvrian terminology (1991), where people have to cope with physical and political transformations. Through these everyday experiences of urban collective life solidarities are formed, feelings of dissatisfaction and grievance are articulated and sometimes translated into collective demands and political struggles.

To be clear, urbanisation does not homogenise the social or material world. Indeed, as scholars such as Keil (2018) and others (Phelps, 2015; Simone & Pieterse, 2017) have been at pains to remind us, the process of urbanisation is uneven, differentiated and heterogenous in its effects. This is apparent when we look for example at transport infrastructures as an articulation of urbanisation. Transport infrastructures cut through the earth installing new boundaries and connections in a physical sense. They also shrink geographical distances, provide economic opportunities for some while making it difficult for others to stay put due to rising land prices. In some cases, transport infrastructures rework the urban fabric entirely and overhaul the ways people live together. They can impose environmental burdens on some, whilst easing the daily commute to work for others. Transport infrastructures are also good examples of how urbanisation becomes the stake of political action and democratic politics beyond the confines of the city proper.

Urbanisation is not a singular, simple process. But it is a process we experience collectively if often very differently. As the dominant social-economic process, our position within the urbanisation-capitalism nexus shapes subjectivity and our relations with each other as well as the world around us. For the wealthy, urbanisation can be a financial opportunity: a process of accumulation, enclosure and exclusion. For most other urbanites, processes of recent urbanisation are increasingly about dealing with the plundering of collective labour markets, to changes in housing supply, the skyrocketing of rents or the production of homelessness. The struggles urbanisation provokes are not only problems of territorial regulation that simply need adjustment but are, to a large extent, struggles experienced by urbanites as they work,

move and live in urban spaces. Urbanisation does not land on top of people, rather it is worked into, and experienced in, daily life practices. It thereby transforms the ways urbanites interact and establish organisational patterns of everyday life.

### *How urbanisation and democracy are interlinked*

There is a clear sense in research that urbanisation impacts on opportunities people have for self-organisation and empowerment. In recent years, this issue has received more attention from scholars across different disciplines. In the field of political science and democratic theory, questions of governance capacity, democratic legitimacy and electoral behaviour are addressed, while in human and political geography, there is more interest in how access to urban infrastructures and varying processes of displacement and segregation are politically structured. In the fields of urban sociology and politics, the focus is more on how urbanisation changes the opportunities of different social communities and political demands to organise, to voice and to become part of a governing coalition. Despite the diversity of perspectives and lines of argumentation, we can detect three threads running through these debates on the urban and democracy.

- Urbanisation challenges and undermines institutions of democratic action because of the increasing mismatch between the shifting spatial practices generated by urbanisation and the representations of space inscribed in existing rules and norms of democratic governance. Put simply, global urbanisation does not respect political jurisdictions (or scales of government) (Brenner, 2004; Heinelt & Kübler, 2005). It leads to new political, social and economic centralities and peripheries. Power relations change and inscribe new territorial hierarchies as urbanisation advances. Further, there is also often a mismatch between the capacities of regulatory space and the forces it is confronted with. As a result, state structures and governance regimes are pressured to adjust or to develop new layers of authority and administration, if they can (Pierre, 2011). The state becomes de-centred within urbanisation, sovereignty ever more of a myth.

- Urbanisation is linked to an urbanity of things and people as constitutive parts of democratic politics (Sendra & Sennett, 2020). Magnusson's (2011) reading can be traced back to the ideas of the Chicago School, which argued that urbanity, i.e., the characteristics of density, proximity and heterogeneity shape the identities of individuals and groups, structuring their experiences of urban space. Contemporary scholars argue that urbanity can provide possibilities for social organising and the spatial resources to forge collectives and protest (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). The urban is always a meeting and mixing of human agency, but material forms (like utility infrastructure, built environment), physical landscape and climatic conditions are also seen as active ingredients in (rather than topics of or backdrops to) politics. Amin & Thrift (2017) argue that seeing like a city is recognising the collective performances taking place between these various elements to generate and stabilise urban spaces of diverse densities, velocities, meanings and activities. While these elements can be and often are assembled to ensure security and predictability, the fact that the urban is dependent on bits and pieces aligning, and always in fragments rather than a whole, makes it politically contingent (McFarlane, 2021; Fariás, 2011; Sendra & Sennett, 2020). Political forces have many routes available to them, and these can be seen to encompass the diversity of material urban worlds rather than focusing on institutions of state (Beveridge & Koch, 2019). Atkinson's (2020) 'Alpha City' London is a study of the power of capital, its elite actors, to (re)shape urban space towards its interests. Boudreau (2017) asserts that our experience, affects and logics of action are increasingly shaped and conditioned by the global urban situations we find ourselves in. In sum, what emerges from these literatures is a strong sense that urbanisation is always already intertwined with political action and democratic engagement and that the socio-materiality of urbanisation is more important for democratic politics than is often acknowledged.

- Urbanisation is a politically generative force, productive in terms of political demands and struggles. Brenner and Schmid argue that the urban can never be subsumed by capitalist or regulatory logics: 'it is

always co-produced and transformed through its users, who may strive to appropriate its actualised or unrealised potentials towards collective social uses, to create new forms of experience, connection and experimentation – in short, to produce a different form of life’ (Brenner & Schmid 2015: 177). Davidson & Iveson (2015), and similarly Keil (2018), stress that urbanisation is experienced, understood and potentially transformed through urban life settings. Purcell (2022) claims that urbanisation, by bringing together different forces and elements of society, aggregates difference in space and prompts a will to self-govern the production of urban space. As an object of governance, the urban is ‘unbound’: multidimensional socio-material processes generative of political demands and logics of political action (Allen & Cochrane 2014). Through the lens of affectedness, Barnett (2014) argues that urbanisation produces objects of political contestation and at the same time provides resources, a communicative background to address these objects. Urbanisation as a frame or narrative of political struggles shapes not only the content of the struggle but also how it unfolds, the strategies that political agents perform. So, the changing built environment turns into a political subject with ‘agentive qualities’ (Barnett, 2014: 1638). The urban, as Simone & Pieterse (2017) vividly describe, is productive – it is an animating force in which the differences between local and global, public and private, exterior and interior, intensive and extensive, blur, often in concussive ways that generate tensions. What Simone and Pieterse observe is that while the traditional rules of politics are still in view, in terms of policy in particular, their power to shape and resonate with urban collective life are diminished.

In summary, what these literature suggest is that the impact of urbanisation on democracy goes beyond political institutions and runs deep into a kaleidoscope of collective everyday life. Pre-existing, fixed and stable containers of politics such as administrative units or political institutions (e.g., municipalities or planning or statistical units) do not and cannot align with these forces, even as they retain political relevance (Schmid et al., 2018: 23; Barnett, 2014). In short, urbanisation affects democracy in profound

ways, shaping the way in which people comprehend their democratic possibilities, demanding new conceptual lenses (Beveridge & Koch, 2022).

### *Seeing like a city*

To see like a city or to look at politics through an urban lens makes reference to Scott’s (1998) ‘Seeing Like a State’ and Magnusson’s (2011) urban take, ‘Seeing Like a City’. Scott argues that the social organisation of the state involves a certain way of looking at and acting upon the world and the people inhabiting it. This way of seeing not only reshapes the world but also creates a dominant framework to understand what societies do as well as how they should do them. The state not only administers social and economic issues but also imposes a particular vision of how we relate different parts and processes of the world to each other. The state – understood as a form of collective organisation and domination bringing together the principle of sovereignty, the monopoly and administration of knowledge in form of bureaucracy and a form of charismatic politics – has become the natural locus of everything we refer to when we use the term politics and when we want to negotiate social possibilities (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Jessop, 2007). Seeing politics and democracy like a state implies a certain political rationality and governmentality where the relation between the state and its subjects takes centre stage. At the same time, this governmentality is not totalising, and the state can embody empirically different often conflicting forms and practices (Cooper, 2017).

Magnusson’s (2011) shift from a state lens to an urban lens on politics is at first glance one of concepts and language. He argues that the ‘urban’ is not organised by or confined to scales or levels of authority and agency, but is rather a way of life as well as politics, of diversity and self-governance, characterised by multiple authorities rather than state sovereignty. Yet, this move has empirical and normative consequences. How we as observers and scholars tell the story of how urbanites respond to spatial and social transformation differs depending on the lenses we use. Looking through an urban lens, new empirical phenomena come to the fore, others recede

(Kaufmann & Sidney, 2020). In normative terms, we shed light on a politics often overlooked in public debates. This politics is not simply about city elites, business owners, elected officials and civil servants, and how they build coalitions to achieve urban development and order. Instead, what emerges is the crucial role of localised action by urbanites and how they mobilise around day-to-day issues, as Davidson & Iveson (2015) have cogently argued in their defence of the city concept. The urban view is one from within the thick of things, thronged by life rather than apart from it. 'To see the political through the city is to notice how proximate diversity stimulates self-organisation and self-government, generates politics in and between authorities in different registers, and defers the sovereignty claims it produces', as Magnusson (2014: 1563) puts it. Hence, the city is a way of looking at and acting upon the world in which one is located.

Yet, the theoretical roots of much thinking on urban politics (as well as democracy) are also burdened by the state and its relation to the 'city'. Usually, the political character of the city is seen as an effect of statehood established within the boundaries of a clearly defined political entity. The city is seen as an embryo-like nation state. The Greek polis is of course the best-known case, but the European medieval city-states (like Florence and Venice) provide further examples. In this view, the polis is political because it is administered by (para-)state bodies.

But what if the political character of the city is an effect of its urban condition (and not of its state structures)? Following Magnusson (2014), this is to see politics not in a realm formally separate from society (i.e., the state) but rather embedded in the social-material world around us, in the everyday things we do. The state is not gone altogether, and the focus of politics should not just be the 'outside' of state institutions. Rather, the informalisation induced by urbanisation might also transform the very idea and practice of the state in an emergent political order. Boudreau's conception of an urban logic of political action foregrounds urbanity, the 'here and now', as it occurs in 'networked, fluid and mobile spaces' and 'escapes the reach of, and is not directed towards, the geographically bounded state' (Boudreau, 2017: 16, 60). Urban

collective life is the political horizon, the state de-centred within, though not excluded from, democratic possibilities, potentially enrolled in democratic projects, albeit at an 'interstitial distance' (Beveridge & Koch, 2022: 127 pp.; Critchley 2005). The prospect here of a non-sovereign state, suggested by some of the new municipalism of Barcelona and Naples (Beveridge & Koch, 2022: 138–144), emerges from the embrace of a contingent stance to the state, seen neither as friend nor enemy.

This is a vision of democratic politics quite different to that often found in urban scholarship, which views activism and social movements as the urban demos beyond, in opposition to, if still framed by, the state (for discussion, see Beveridge & Koch, 2022: 18–19). It is distinct too from political strategies implied by an influential strand of post-foundationalist thinking in urban research (e.g., Swyngedouw, 2009) which explicitly or implicitly divides between 'politics' (the ordering of consensus) and the 'political' (the emancipatory irruptions within the order) and in so doing lacks a convincing means of accounting for, and engaging with, the richness of political life in urban settings, as well as the complexities and ambiguities of the state-democracy nexus (Kohn 2016, Cooper 2017, Bianchi 2022). By seeing democracy like a city, democratic politics in response to urbanisation becomes apparent in diverse forms of political practice and organisation in cities. These might not conform to conventional understandings of democracy but are nonetheless examples of people coming together to collectively decide on and organise urban life and citizenship (Wojciechowska, 2022).

Nonetheless, there is, as Davies (2014) so rightly reminds us, a dark side of urban power, and urbanisation itself (Beveridge & Koch, 2022: 9). An epistemological shift to seeing like a city can transform how we understand democracy and provide hope in the process (Davidson & Iveson, 2015). Yet, it cannot blind us to the fact that much of what we *see* in towns and cities is not democratic nor showing much potential to be so. Against this backdrop, how should we write about the prospects for change? To be clear this is not just a question of description, of looking and seeing the 'reality'. Indeed, it is to acknowledge that the concepts and

categories often used in research are inadequate to the challenge of grasping and changing our urban worlds (Slater, 2021). The task is then to develop an understanding of democracy which both resonates with the present but helps us see, and move, beyond it. Hence, our argument is not that there are two entirely separate worlds of democratic politics – here the state, there the city. Rather what we argue is that there are two different ways of seeing it and therefore transforming it.

To address the challenges of contemporary democracies we need to understand democratic practices in all their complexities rather than in terms of certain specific elements, e.g., elections, governments, party politics, social movements, etc. To see like a city adds to that complexity and forces us to think about how state-embedded forms of democratic action and institutions might foster or hamper urban ways of self-organisation and self-government. And in turn, how urban collective life might be instrumental for reimagining and rejuvenating nascent or long established but increasingly challenged institutional arenas and processes of democracy. What is more, it is also through these complexities that we can delineate a path towards resisting injustice and transforming society.

### **Can there be still a democratic project of the city?**

Urbanisation, as we argue in the previous section, challenges practices and institutions of politics. In this section, we claim that urbanisation also provides democratic possibilities, and the city might be instrumental for these possibilities to come to fruition. Within the context of urban research, the city is, at first glance, an unlikely candidate to reinforce democracy or to open up democratic imagination as urbanisation strongly calls into question the meaning and usefulness of the concept of the city, both politically and spatially. In this section, we argue that even though the city as a distinct urban form and specific moment in the process of urbanisation has lost its clarity (Wachsmuth, 2014), the city as a representation of urbanisation, an object of struggle and democratic ambition makes people do things. The city as a democratic imaginary (see e.g., Frick 2023) is

generative of political practices, organisation and democratic demands. The institutions and formal procedures of politics are less important than the situated actions of urban collectives and the everyday lived experiences of urbanisation. Cities are, then, those spaces that enable or facilitate experiments in collective self-rule regardless of their urban form. In this sense, the city has democratic purchase both empirically and theoretically.

### *The city as ideology and political project*

One of the most prevalent political claims in urban struggles was and maybe still is The Right To The City. There has been intense debate about whether the notion of a right is appropriate or if it is even possible to construct and enact a right to the city in the first place. As Kohn (2016) and Purcell (2013) have argued that claim should not be interpreted as a strictly judicial or legal right but as a political claim which serves the purpose of gaining access to the city while also laying the ground for, and fuelling experiences of, acts of citizenship and solidarity. But what the term ‘city’ might mean has been much less debated as if this part of the Right To The City is somehow more self-evident. A closer look reveals however that in the practices of urban movements rallying behind this claim, the meaning and use of the term city is rather open and ambiguous. It can encompass different dimensions ranging from geographical, social and political centrality to various ideas of the commons or urban commonwealth, to political and legal claims to be part of a particular jurisdiction, an institutional entity called *city*. Hence, the city eludes a clear operational definition but retains a political salience. Even if, as Harvey has put it, ‘to claim the right to the city is, in effect, to claim a right to something that no longer exists’ (2012: xv), the city still has meaning for political struggles on the ground. This was probably the paradox that Walker attempted to address in his provocative reflections about planetary urbanisation when he stated that Brenner and Schmid ‘seem to deny the very object of social struggles and hopes, the existing city!’ (Walker, 2015: 189).

Davidson & Iveson (2015) reject any universal understandings of the city but argue for the retention



of the city as a political concept, one rooted in the political practices of urbanites. Intriguingly, de Olde & Oosterlynck (2022) have noted that the city still matters to those who position themselves as outside and in opposition to it (in their case the ‘rural’ areas of Flanders, Belgium). From a different perspective, Wachsmuth (2014) has argued that the city concept is mainly ideological. It does not denote an empirical moment of urbanisation that can be properly delineated as a unit of urban analysis. Instead, what the concept of the city helps to do is to represent a certain relation between urbanites to processes of urbanisation. He reconstructs the concept of the city *as ideology* along with three tropes of the traditional city – the opposition between city and country, the city as a self-contained system and the city as an ideal type – and shows that these tropes have served as political purposes and that the imaginary of the city is not neutral to power relations. Wachsmuth (2014) makes this case to call for caution, to not celebrate notions such as the right to the city without reflecting on the wider implications and meanings of the ‘city as a normative concept’ (ibid.: 87). We appreciate his call for care. But at the same time, we would highlight the potential of the city (as ideology) to overcome or at least challenge existing power relations.

If we go back in history, the city was crucial for democratic politics in those projects that are often grouped under the label of municipal socialism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In some cities, municipal socialism has left lasting marks on the urban fabric. Social housing projects, vast utility infrastructures, but also ways of organising, community symbols and places of struggles are alive and visible in many cities. Municipalism has been understood as a diverse set of ‘laboratories of decentralised economic life’ (Dogliani, 2002: 574). Projects of municipal socialism represented, to varying degrees, attempt to disrupt dominant logics of privatisation and profit-making that restricted fair access to basic resources in the city (Leopold & McDonald, 2012). By doing so, municipal socialism not only made infrastructures and services accessible to a growing urban population but also made democracy real in terms of the policies that facilitated urban life and the political aspirations they unleashed (Moss, 2020). It established socio-political spaces in which working-class people could

access crucial amenities and life opportunities. But even where municipal socialism was most successful, not all urbanites were included in this democratic project. Municipal socialism was mainly a project of the organised working class and social democratic parties aiming to represent them in state institutions. So municipal socialism was selective in terms of policies and organisational means. It was ultimately a project resting on the state as governmental machinery of democracy, as a set of resources to be won through election and wisely used by the elected and expert few for the benefits of the many.

The city in municipal socialism projects fits with the tropes identified by Wachsmuth. It provided or installed a clear boundary between the city and the country, where the country was often represented by the nation-state and corresponded much more with the political idea of a nation. The political ambition was really to create a self-contained and self-supporting system as far as possible. It rested on the ideal-typical notion of the city as a specific urban form. If we look for instance at the example of Red Vienna these tropes were incorporated into the functioning and the vision of the municipal governments but also knitted in the urban fabric through municipal housing estates, the development of a tax system along the principles of autarky and the support of civic organisation that should build and nurture the solidarity of the urban society. The political project of the city in municipal socialism was founded on or was aspiring towards a congruence of the geographical unit of the city, urban society and political institutions. The city in this project is a top-down political institution representing urban society. There is an identification of society and the public with the state. Forms of government are established, which shape urban everyday life but are at a distance to them. The goal is the democratisation of housing, transport and other urban infrastructures and services. But democracy is filtered through the state system, the provider of political resources and the democratiser of urban resources.

### *The city as governmental category*

In the political project of municipal socialism, the city and urban space merge into a governmental

category. This comes with implications as Roy (2016) has strongly argued. In her view, the categories of city and urban impose a particular form of governmentality over certain places, while ignoring and marginalising other forms of self-rule or collective organisation. It is not just about domination or violence. This form of governmentality also provides for spaces and life-worlds outside market relations. Nevertheless, Roy insists that there is a tendency to ignore the constitutive aspect of state power and domination when the term city or urban is used. In her discussion of Sanctuary Cities (2019), it becomes clear that even when a city establishes practices of sanctuary for disenfranchised and expelled people, recourse to state violence of the police is still a formative part of the (re)production of urban space and what makes that city function as such.

A different line of argument is provided by Magnusson (2011) through his reading of the political genealogy of the city. For him the democratic potential as well as the political distinctiveness of the city derives from its socio-spatial characteristics, that is, the proximate heterogeneity of urban everyday life. As noted above, Magnusson (2011) sees the democratic potential of the city not in its statehood but in its urbanity, the urban way of living, which eludes and even exceeds sovereignty. This is an empirical claim, for sure, but it is also an epistemological claim. Magnusson wants a shift in perspective on politics and democracy: away from the nation-state and the concentration on sovereignty, pre-existing identities and communities and fixed boundaries to the city as a non-sovereign polity encompassing multiple political authorities with emerging agencies that escape any attempts at fixing boundaries.

When we read Roy and Magnusson alongside each other questions emerge that could pull the analysis in quite different directions: is the city/the urban primarily a governmental category as per Roy (2016) or should the governmental dimension of the city really be excluded when we think of the democratic potential of the city? Does it make sense to choose between these two options or is there a certain undecidability and contingency in these categories? It could be that they do not

designate a clear-cut reality and their productivity resides exactly in this vagueness. What Roy (2016) is pointing to is that the city or the urban as category turns into a stake when, for example, governments introduce the urban as an administrative category. She rightly argues that there are many layers of different realities and a multitude of spatial practices which cannot be subsumed under the label of the urban.

### *The ambiguity and productivity of the city*

Even in everyday language this openness or ambiguity is present. Whenever we use the term city, we usually imply the city as a place, with a name, 'Cairo', 'Cape Town' and 'Copenhagen'. These places are not clearly demarcated in time and space but are looser, if still distinct, often related to places beyond. They have a certain specificity and materiality, a social life and sometimes strong political traditions marked by harsh conflicts over past, present and future (Massey, 2007). This socio-materiality can provide the conditions within which democracy flourishes, from everyday interactions to moments of coming together in the squares and in other places of meaning-making.

If we turn back to the Right to the City struggles – in these different moments and patterns of city-claiming and city-making, 'movements of insurgent urban citizenship' can be generated (Holston, 2019). This urban form of citizenship is about striving to become a part of the actual city composed of varying built environments, objects, infrastructures, ways of life and political agents. But the city as such a political assemblage has no predefined form, substance or boundary. Rather, in this sense, the city is virtual, it is an idea. But it becomes actual when things, matters of public concern and bodies are made visible as people come together to self-fashion the demos. Sometimes urbanites do claim a right to the city as an imagined place, but in doing so they are also claiming a democratic right to the actual places they inhabit. And, vice versa, when urbanites make a claim to a specific city as a democratic place, they are also making a claim to that city as an imagined place. Here, the city becomes a category of democratic empowerment and insurgency. How

should we understand the city as a simultaneously virtual and actual place?

The distinction refers to Isin's (2007) work and the argument that the city, in contrast to the nation state, is a virtual *and* actual space. The term city can become powerful because it foregrounds the relations between the physicality of buildings and the social arrangements, practices and meanings in any given place. The term 'city' links the visibility of place to the invisibility of all the norms, aspirations and demands co-constituting this place. The city contains meanings, imaginaries and promises that are real and that exist beyond but are not independent of the physicality of the actual city. However, as Isin (2007) insists, we should not conflate the imagined with the physical space or reduce one to the other. The *urbs* does not generate *civitas* per se. Urbanised space does not inevitably become the city. It must be reclaimed and lived as a city to become one. In turn, *civitas* needs actual spaces to become meaningful for urbanites. With Isin we can argue that the city is indeed an arena, '*through which* groups define their identity, stake their claims, wage their battles and articulate citizenship rights, obligations and principles. The city as an object of thought and experience emerges out of these practices and has neither the unity nor the cohesion that has been attributed to it'. (Isin, 2007: 223)

It is here that the materiality of the city most clearly gives way to the imagined character of the city. Ideas about what a city means are often contested, but this shows the political productivity the city can still have. Furthermore, ideas about the city always exceed the materiality of the named place: hopes, plans and projects of the city exceed the actual places in which they are articulated. It is in this sense that the city can provide a horizon of democracy. It can be the location where claims are made, a location that is both actual and material (made up of the places urbanites inhabit) and conceptual and normative (a place of ideas and values). Indeed, it is a kind of 'concrete utopia' (Pinder, 2015), embedded within but paradoxically always exceeding urban places.

The interventions of Isin, Magnusson and Roy make it clear that we need to problematise the city and the urban as frames of reference and seemingly

self-evident backgrounds to democratic action. The city has not been dissolved – it is still there but its relation to democracy has changed because of urbanisation. In the next section, we present a way of thinking through the resonance between the city and urbanisation, understanding the city as a category of practice, one in which democratic action occurs not in a realm formally separate from society nor the state but embedded within collective life.

### **The democratic project of the city in times of urbanisation**

What does an urban lens mean for our understanding of democracy? What practices of democracy are appropriate in the context of global urbanisation? Our argument is that meaningful answers to these questions necessitate a reworking of our concepts and methodologies in order to embrace and appreciate what is happening in urban areas. An urban lens on democracy does not prescribe a distinct urban model of democracy. Rather it forces us to readjust and re-evaluate the normative foundations of our democratic ideas, institutions and practices. We are used to thinking about democracy in terms of voting rights, party politics and free speech. But global urbanisation compels us to think more about our relation to the urban spaces and places of everyday life we inhabit as being a question of democracy. The possibility to stay put, to have secure housing tenure seen through an urban lens appears not only as a social question but also as a democratic question. Indeed, following a recent article by Lancione (2019), we can understand housing as a gateway to wider struggles for urban democracy. He argues that struggles around housing are not confined to lowering the costs of housing or fostering the production of affordable housing units through state interventions or the like, but are more profound and politically far-reaching in their engagements with how we live together in urban space. Seen through our urban lens, seeing democracy like a city, we can ask what housing does or can do for a more fundamental democratic politics of urban life and its resources. Housing can be an outcome of such a democratic politics but more importantly, it is also a generator

of democratic politics as housing or home can provide the sources and the stake for democratic engagement in the first place.

### *Urban space and radical democracy*

In more conventional notions of democracy, the source of democratic engagement is seen to lie in the interests or preferences a certain group of people share as a result of their position within society. The analytical lenses common to mainstream political science not only provide data on these topics but they also work to make politics 'real' on these terms and democracy a question of understanding interest-formation and the like. Seeing democracy like a city, adopting a different epistemology, exposes a completely different horizon of political action: urban collective life. It centres on urban space, distinct material objects situated in the urban fabric and providing meaning to urbanites, operate as infrastructure for collectives to form and articulate shared matters of concern. Urban space becomes the stake of democratic action (Purcell, 2022). Home is one such material object because, following Lancione (2019) and others (Vilenica et al., 2020; Madden & Marcuse, 2016), home and dwelling is a way to relate oneself as a person or a collective to the wider socio-material world. It can be a means to overcome the power relations inscribed in the materiality and sociability of the city and to (re-)establish a form of connection and resonance with that environment. It is both a way to become political in relation to urbanisation and a mode of locating politics, building the spaces and infrastructures of self-government.

If we see like a city the places we inhabit, the vulnerabilities of our bodies within them, become a source, stake and setting for democratic politics. Politics and the struggle for democracy begins in the socio-materiality of where we live, work, play and rest. It is from these locations of everyday life that urbanisation is understood and felt. Of course, urbanisation makes and remakes these locations at the same time. Put differently, how we think about democracy and how we want to practice democracy is intertwined with different processes of urbanisation which de-stabilise established and institutionalised forms of

democracy. Urbanisation changes the way we think and understand ourselves as citizens. It provides a different horizon of politics and offers a challenge to conventional ways of thinking about democracy. We see urban collective life and the practices, publics and places where it is articulated as a helpful way into grasping what an urban democracy might entail (see Beveridge & Koch, 2022). In sum, a key shift towards seeing democracy like a city is to see politics not in a realm formally separate from society or the state but rather entangled in the social-material worlds we inhabit, part of the everyday things we do.

Within this urban view, we still need a means of conceptualising democracy as a form of politics, of understanding how the demos comes together to govern itself. This entails an engagement with democratic theory. To comprehend what is happening on the ground, so to speak, we follow the tradition of radical democracy. In many ways, urban scholars and political theorists share the conviction that the city and the urban are, as Purcell (2022: 11) puts it, 'integral to the practice of radical democracy'. Despite the differences within the tradition, a radical vision of democracy is one of multiple and expanding practices of self-government which should not and cannot be limited to jurisdictions, scales, levels or sectors of life (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). From this, political institutions can be a means for democracy to advance but not its goal nor its limit. This implies that all political institutions, norms and values are open to scrutiny. Central to radical democracy theory is the understanding that closure or completion is impossible in society (Marchart, 2007). In this perspective, democracy is always distrustful of authority, resistant to domination and primed to challenge established norms in society. Democracy is, therefore, a range of tensions rather than an institutional framework (Beveridge & Koch, 2022).

Collective self-government is democratic in the extent to which it embodies a democratic ethos embracing the contingency and openness of politics as unavoidable and affirmatively necessary (Marchart, 2007), whilst struggling for equality through the making of common causes (Euben, 2001). Coming together for the common good generates the political experience necessary to standing up to oppression and

domination. Democracy takes shape in practice. It may be short-lived but is multifarious in form and strives for a lasting transformation of the political order, of enduring relations of collective organisation (Wolin, 2016). This may involve the establishment of general rights – such as the right to adequate housing or the right to access clean water and sanitation etc. – but it is not restricted to demanding rights or policies from or through the state.

### *Locating democracy in practices and places*

In our reading of the radical tradition of democracy practice is central, not only in terms of a distinction to institutions but also in terms of understanding how it unfolds, its very conditions of possibility. Practices, based on tacit knowledge are repetitions. At the same time, practices are structurally open due to their temporality (Reckwitz, 2002; Wacquant, 2023). Seeing practices as the core of democracy implies it can be different across time and space, that a diversity of democratic experiences can be witnessed when we refrain from seeing state institutions as the natural places to look for democracy (Beveridge & Koch, 2022: 57–58). In practice, democracy cannot be limited to a form of government. It is a ‘mode of being’, a way to experience and shape the common world (Wolin, 1994; Kateb, 2001).

Housing struggles and the building of homes provide a common case where practices help to forge collectives and the homes themselves serve as infrastructures of political contention and self-rule. Minuchi (2016; 2021) has provided insights on examples from Rosario (Argentina) and Guayaquil (Ecuador) which are illustrative of similar stories all over the world. A material politics of construction is depicted, a different political logic based on action in and upon urban space. Participation in the construction, the self-building of homes, becomes a way of using urban infrastructures to disrupt embedded forms of urbanisation, such as massive state-led but market-oriented housing development projects and translating diverse ideas into an alternative material world. In this way, urbanisation can be turned into a project of democracy, grasped, localised and remade as practices of self-government.

Democracy in this view is always ultimately a relation between people in places, as they come together and attempt to define the common good and develop collective forms of organisation to achieve them. It is not, therefore, a relation between ‘state’ and ‘society’. It does not rely on formal institutions for its democratic character, but rather the practices of people and the bonds they form between themselves. There have been many excellent in-depth sociologies of urban movements which have shown how becoming political and making democratic claims is bound-up with everyday life experiences and encounters (Boudreau et al., 2009; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). Democracy thus implies the search for and creation of opportunities for people to engage in public life, to experience commonality and collective enjoyment. The emphasis on democratic practices expands the definition of citizenship. A citizen is not only, or even primarily, a bearer of rights and duties, but a political person whose life and actions are rooted in the places where their lives occur (Wolin, 2016: 261).

The story of the Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH) in Barcelona is telling and illustrative in this regard. The PAH emerged during Spain’s economic crisis in 2008, as jobs were lost, housing crisis emerged and the notion of an aspirational middle-class democracy through home-ownership collapsed. The PAH was trying ‘to generate a space of confidence, where people lose their fear, empower themselves and verify that alone they cannot but together they can’ (Garcia-Lamarca, 2017: 425). PAH grew as a collective with people losing their fear of eviction, of asserting themselves as political agents. The PAH was also successful in generating a wider project of democracy, feeding into the capture of Barcelona’s local government through its crucial role in the citizen platform Barcelona en Comú (Beveridge & Koch, 2022: 84). Home and housing were strongly generative, a democratic project of the city became bound up with reshaping ideas of what democracy is and where it should take place, whilst also occupying the institutions of state power, the conventional locus of modern democracy. This new municipalist experiment (Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2021) might be seen as giving substance to the assertion in radical democracy theory

that the relation between the demos, the people striving for democracy and the institutions that ultimately give democracy a certain form, stand in enduring and unresolvable tension.

In radical democracy theory, there is some disagreement as to how this tension can best be articulated in real-world politics. What the political theorist Marchart (2007) calls a 'dissociative' perspective views agonistic and antagonistic conflicts as the only way to unsettle political order and assert democracy. By contrast, the 'associative' strand claims it is possible to come together in the public realm around shared concerns, to develop collectives through repeated practices, which in turn have democratic force. While the dissociative strand thinks that democracy can only be realised and rescued through acts confronting the dominant political order institutionalised in states and government, associative thinkers argue that democracy is rather generated through shared practices and experiences and their expansion through political life.

The challenge for an associative understanding of democracy is not to fall into the local trap or to be mistaken for a communitarian project trusting only in the unitary cultural experience of small-scaled communities. To be clear, the need to localise democratic practices is not due to the assumption that local practices are more democratic than practices at any other scale. Rather, it is due to the insight that material and tacit properties are always local in the sense that they take place in a specific locale at a specific time because they are embodied practices – practices realised and articulated by human bodies.

It is precisely this property of democratic action that underscores that the way urbanites relate to their immediate urban environment is a crucial democratic question. It is not one which can be resolved by referring to established institutional rules exactly because access to urban space is a condition of collective organising and democratic claim-making in the first place. This is one reason why property regimes are such a key subject of political contestation and scholarly debate. Indeed, one cannot look at the (unfulfilled) aspirations of urban self-government without considering state-backed urban property regimes. Loick (2016) used squatting to show how property is deeply entangled

with the idea of sovereignty. Property regimes are instruments of power shaping social and political arrangements within society. Such regimes do not, as liberal political theory assumes, enable the effective use of goods and resources but instead ensure that access to and use of them is restricted. Property in the mode of possessive individualism (Roy, 2017) is exclusive and alienating as it prevents people from relating in meaningful ways with their urban surroundings. In contrast, cooperatives (like Community Land Trusts, etc.), which are based on common property, and squats, which articulate practices that refuse to be included in regimes of property, rearrange or transgress existing property regimes. They also call on the state not as an enforcer of property rights but as the facilitator of commons and commoning. Property in the sense of commoning does not exclude other potential users but enables and broadens access to the urban common-wealth.

Current struggles around housing, like those touched on here, encourage us to understand the materiality of the urban as an infrastructure of democratic engagement not limited to temporary participation. The stake of democratic politics is no longer the institutionalised mechanisms of power delegation – such as elections – but rather the institutionalised and not institutionalised rules and practices that sustain and structure relations between the urban world that we inhabit and the ways we can influence this world. The state plays a key role therein, of course, but it is not the sole arbiter of urban transformation. What is more, looking through an urban lens, the actual materiality of specific places and problems comes to the fore, the bodies entangled with these places. Through a state lens, however, these elements are often separated from politics and not accounted for. Seeing democracy like a city forces us to take all these complexities, entanglements into consideration to make sense of how urbanites can influence the world they inhabit.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have addressed urbanisation as a question of democracy. We have identified

a democratic horizon emerging in the processes of global urbanisation and the struggles attached to it. To see and embrace this horizon, an epistemological shift is necessary: away from the state to practices residing in the urban everyday; to focus on urban collective life and the political subjects emerging from it. The city as an actual and virtual object can play a crucial role in bringing different struggles together. It can ground a democratic horizon of spaces of collective self-government not limited to a particular urban form. Taking this perspective, urban space has an important role to play not just as a background or stage of political contestation but as a source and stake.

What role the city in contemporary struggles for democracy? Returning to Isin (2007), the city is both actual and virtual. The city is the political imaginary which stands for the re-grounding of democracy in urban space and the ambition of self-government in proximate socio-material processes (i.e., urbanisation). The struggle for the city is the struggle for democracy: to access, enjoy and co-determine the common-wealth generated by urbanisation. 'City' is then the name for all those spaces where urban publics emerge and act. As a virtual space, the city provides the symbolic horizon where different struggles come together and have actual effects. Isin makes a key point when he argues that 'virtual bodies [i.e., states, nations, empires] are assemblages that are kept together by practices organised around and grounded in the city' (Isin, 2007: 212). We can think of this as a call not to make binary distinctions between the virtual state and the actual city. Rather, the city might be the ground where the state aims to assert its sovereignty and power, and where urban democracy is always caught in the tension between this claim for sovereignty and the claim for self-rule and resonance.

Further, the city as democratic imaginary helps to forge coalitions between different struggles across different fields. Indeed, urban publics are often interlinked and networked across several domains and policies. The imaginary of the city can bring them together as a collective project and common property apart from or at a distance to the nation state. Often the starting point for common struggles

and collective organisation is the feared or threatened expulsion from urban spaces and the possibilities that urbanity provides and to which urbanites contributed in the first place. It is often the expropriative and extractive nature of urbanisation that leads people to organise, claim their rights and pursue acts of citizenship. It is in this sense that a distinct urban form of democratic action can be perceived.

Seeing democracy like a city has three major implications for thinking about politics:

- There are decentred ways of organising and acting politically and the contested boundaries between different authorities, jurisdictions and state or non-state agencies. Who is in control of collective authority is not clear from the outset. The urban provides the sources and places to build and to localise political capacity in the first place and to develop specific knowledges and practices to address shared place-based concerns. While such an urban lens should not obscure the power of the state, it brings the active role of citizens into view and the contingencies of urban spaces into relief. This also means that the emergent urban democracy we envision might best be approached through its distinct practices rather than its institutional forms. We are so used to taking institutions as entry points for the study of democracy that it is easy to assume they gave birth to democratic politics and remain a solid basis for its continuation, rather than being themselves the outcome of democratic struggles and the subject of constant contest. Democratic practices give meaning to the idea and the institutions of democracy, rather than the other way round.

- Proximity of everyday life is a source of political knowledge and policy. Politics and policy does not rest ultimately or only on bureaucratic and legal rules but increasingly on situated and place-based spatial knowledge. What is distinctive about an urban democracy is exactly the relational materiality, the complex web of human and non-human agents and environments, that makes up a place and conditions how urbanites engage therein. So, we do not suggest a shift to the local scale, but rather an engagement with places and locales

where practices of and for democracy emerge. To be clear, this is not just a phenomenological argument. It is also an argument about different resources of democratic action. We are used to thinking of power, money, social ties and networks, legal and violent authority, when we think about resources. But an urban view shows that there are other resources of democratic action; bodies assembled in urban collective life, shared practices and histories of situated engagement, alternative visions of urban space realised in temporary or more stable projects which provide an infrastructure to gather and to establish a sense of collectivity beyond pre-given communities.

- Political legitimacy is not established and conferred through institutions and venues of electoral politics merging liberal ideas of equality with charismatic elements of competition for leadership. In its place, public participation and immediate spatial engagement becomes more crucial for political projects and policy processes to become legitimate and politically viable. In contrast to statist visions, democracy does not start with an empirically and legally given political subject of a demos. Political subjects in an urban democracy are not delineated and confined by legal statuses or the idea of a culturally and spatially bounded community. Political subjects are emergent. Through urban democratic publics, matters of concern become visible and at the same time these publics provide the grounds for different political subjectivities.

We have described processes of global urbanisation as a powerful and extensive force that destabilises geographical, social, economic and political boundaries. To see democracy like a city means to take urbanisation seriously as a process that shapes the way collectives organise themselves and want to self-govern themselves, the claims and demands they articulate and forms and practices through which these collectives become political. The city is important in this shift because it provides a way of looking at democratic politics different from the nation-state lens; what is more, the city also provides a political goal or ambition namely to become part of the city as a way to become a citizen despite, and in confrontation with, the

definition of citizenship rights provided by the state. And lastly, the city also provides a different imaginary of a common property or commonwealth which is always already based on the premise that the world is produced collectively (Kohn, 2016).

Following the radical tradition of democracy, the demos cannot be assumed but is rather something that needs to be constituted and as such is never stable or complete. Here, urbanisation provides new sources. The constitution of the demos (or other collective identities) itself becomes part of democratic politics. In other words, democracy needs to be grounded and, at the same time, generate its own (temporary) grounds. Democratic practices are thus material practices reliant on bodies and artefacts (Butler, 2016). This seems to be a truism, but most conventional accounts of democracy do without the materiality of people and things. Such a perspective on democracy enables connections to and between those literatures interested in urban practices of self-organising but are often reluctant to reflect on the democratic meaning and effect these practices can have. Through these connections knowledge can be built and shared, contributing to a democratic project of urbanisation in which people come together in particular places at particular times to forge collective relations and goals.

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