How transformative can a democratic project of the urban be?

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Abstract
In our initial paper we presented the urban as a question of democracy. The aim was to advance thinking about democracy through thinking about the urban, to use contemporary urban theory to theorise contemporary democracy. Seeing Democracy Like a City involves looking differently at the urban world out there, but also looking a little differently at the world of urban research in journals like this one. Underpinning our work was the epistemological release arising from an urban ontology of politics, as the state shuffles stage right and urbanity moves centre stage. The forum articles suggest that seeing democracy like a city can be inspiring. But the question of how transformative this approach can actually be is posed by all the authors. In this rejoinder we highlight some of the issues we think are crucial to address this question and to unlock the transformative potential of an urban democracy.

Keywords
Democracy, urban, urbanisation, city, politics

We are very grateful to the editors of Dialogues in Urban Research for this wonderful opportunity and to the remarkable group of scholars who have contributed to this forum. All have, in their different ways, not only influenced our work but have fundamentally shaped research on urban politics and democracy. The rich and insightful responses to our paper suggest there is much to be gained from our approach. Seeing democracy like a city opens up a horizon of political action and possibility. By this we meant that we could see things in the city anew; that things already happening could be interpreted as part of an urban way of doing democracy; disparate practices embedded in urban life situations, as well as the more visible and better-known urban movement activisms, can be viewed through this lens as a fundamental part of a democratic politics of the urban. At the same time, a question emerges across the responses: what transformative potential does seeing democracy like a city unlock? Of course, there can be no definitive answer to this question, but in the following we address some of the concerns feeding doubt about our view of democracy,
and point to ways forward in the discussion. Our response highlights three interlinked themes: transformation, the normative horizon of democracy and urban power.

**On transformation**

What can and cannot urban democracy do to change the world for the better? A first step is to delineate transformation itself and consider where an urban democracy can actually start in order to bring about real change. As researchers we have a crucial role. Seeing democracy like a city is an epistemological project: a different way of knowing democracy. This brings into focus actors, spaces and forms of urban practice that have rarely been understood as part of democratic politics and therefore have not enjoyed the legitimacy and recognition of other more conventional practices (e.g., voting, demonstrating). As Julie-Anne Boudreau (2024: 3 XX) states advancing democracy is about embracing a generative epistemology going beyond critique, one which 'requires feeling comfortable with the unknown and seeing research not so much as an explanatory endeavor, and more as a creative and (re)generative one'. The hope is that this differently conceived project of democracy will stimulate and (re)connect people with democracy and political action.

Further, the practices we examine can have a real-world effect. The housing examples we mention in the original paper are neither revolutionary nor reformist in the usual sense. Rather, they explore the relationship between social or communal self-organisation and cooperation with the (local) state in novel ways. And in doing so, they contribute to bringing a different logic of state action into play. They have the potential to change state action through reimagining what democracy can be, by incorporating knowledge and experience from everyday urban life and by allowing attention to actors who are otherwise less in the spotlight. This makes alternatives visible that can make a different future possible. Kurt Iveson’s (2024: 4–5XX), illuminating thoughts on his Sydney example point in this direction too, in particular that becoming a democratic agent, realising one’s own political potential with others, is essential to the understanding and practice of democracy.

**Normative horizons**

A question apparent across the responses was: what normative foundation or normative horizon does democracy entail through an urban lens? To be clear, the urban lens does not lend all actions and ambitions democratic value. On the contrary, urban areas are shaped by constant disputes about shared goals and moral principles and there is nothing inherently democratic about the inhabitation of urban areas. Seeing democracy like a city does, we think, have potential as a generative strategy of advancing transformation, but it does not denote a plan for equality or other normative goals. Margaret Kohn (2024) raises the point about the need for a wider normative project of justice to accompany democracy, which is, most centrally, a means of devising collective decision-making. Seen from this perspective democracy has its limits as a transformative project. But our approach does set different priorities when it comes to understanding democracy as a form of collective problem formulation and search for solutions. In our understanding, and referring to the radical tradition, democracy is ‘a range of tensions rather than an institutional framework’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2023: 12). These tensions are experienced when people come into situated place-based relations and aim to develop common goals and collective forms of organisation. We share Sheldon Wolin’s conviction that democracy is a process and a search to expand the opportunities of people to take part in public life, to develop agency when it comes to steering transformations in their lived environment and to experience commonality along the way. Our horizon of democracy has a particular view of political authority as being based on non-domination and non-sovereignty and thus actually lays the foundation for opening up spaces in which, for example, equality and justice can be negotiated and realised as principles without immediately suffocating them with political realism. Accordingly, democratic authority understood in this way does not have sovereign power, such as the nation state or similar configurations. Accordingly, the consideration of power must also be different.
Urban power

If we consider the power of the forces able to intervene in and reshape urban space, our view of democracy, with its non-sovereignty and scepticism of concentrations and institutionalisations of power (like the state), might be viewed as inadequate to the task at hand. Certainly the question of power is one that our work needs to better confront. Warren Magnusson (2024), the great scourge of state sovereignty, rightly points out that our piece does not address the limitations of an urban way of seeing democracy in such violent times. As he observes (nation) states claim to have the only necessary and legitimate means to organise against violence, to secure peace, whilst they also perpetrate most violence. In the face of enormously equipped armies, what form of power can urban collective life generate to counteract this? How can peace be secured (without a state monopoly of violence)? David Imbroscio’s (2024) contribution is productive in its probing of our work in relation to the state and institutions. However, we would reject his assertion that seeing democracy like a city is somehow a lifestyle politics, a luxury available only to the privileged few, one that democracy can ill afford. Looking at the prospects of urban transformation only through the lens of so-called realism does not open up new possibilities, as Imbroscio’s examples very clearly show. Indeed, might we argue that relying on already existing actions and ideas is itself unrealistic in view of the current situation, in which crisis appears everywhere and progressive transformation feels distant. Ultimately, without a vision of a different path, we will not be able to meet the very real challenges confronting us. We can certainly critique power but we need also to be bolder about how we generate transformative power, and, as Boudreau (2024) reminds us, such power might not be easy to grasp and quantify.

Our idea of a democracy of urban collective life has few obvious resources to confront coordinated capital or militarised violence if one considers power only as a form of domination and sovereign authority. However, if we go beyond that view, and explore decentralised, embodied and resonant forms of power, it is precisely urban collective life that seems to have the resources to confront capital and state violence. The capitalist, but also the statist, must always land in a certain place and enter into connection with existing practices in order to be effective. It is therefore not simply a matter of playing off local bottom-up power against global/national top-down power, but of focusing precisely on those moments in which power is localised, lands and has an impact on urban space. The question we should ask ourselves is what power can urban collective life gather and use in these moments to advance democracy?

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