

Urban Traces

Urban development and planning conflicts: dynamics of contention and trajectories of transformation

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When urban space becomes contested, we discover that it is imbued with a multiplicity of meanings, memories, emotions. We realise that what confers sense to an urban space as a socially and politically connoted place is a complex web of interpretations and attachments. In the process of their unfolding, unsuspected civic resources are often mobilised, collective identities are formed, and new political subjectivities are rendered possible. The contestation of urban developments appears as an incredible generator of social creativity and collective intelligence, and may act as a motor for the renewal of democratic politics. Yet, policy, governance and planning practices and their outcomes fall dramatically short of adequately addressing claims and expectations.

Urban conflicts make it apparent that our democratic practices – as sophisticated and rooted as they might be – are time and again failing to generate consensus and legitimacy for public policy. They tell us a lot about democracy.

Conflicts are events that confront participants with a democratic break, with a suspension of the assumptions of the democratic legitimacy of policy-making and planning procedures. Lack of non-identification with the problematisation offered as well as constraints to contributing to new problematisations are perceived as a limit to democratic empowerment and an attempt at manipulation on the part of urban planners.

This is an important aspect of what theories of radical democracy mean when they refer to the concepts of ‘post-politics’ and ‘post-democracy’.

When the process of political opinion formation becomes a factor for contestation, this develops an own dynamics in relation to the capacity of the policy-making and planning system to respond. The nature of protest and mobilization is relational and dependent on the interaction with political-institutional responses. According to these responses, the nature of protest and mobilization may change significantly. When claims are not heard, then protest and mobilization may change in nature and attitudes, and become increasingly defined by claims for political inclusion and for recognition.

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When conflicts radicalize in this direction, they can easily be seen as expressing a failure of democracy. However, from a radical democratic perspective, the contradiction they express is essential to democracy. As truly 'democratic moments', they mark a revitalisation of the 'political' and the development of the new forms of political subjectivation.

To explore their dynamics and their emergent spaces of opportunity is an important task for critical social science.

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