

Title: **Beyond the post-political: exploring the relational and situated dynamics of consensus and conflict in planning**

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### **Abstract**

This special issue explores the *problematique* of the consensus and conflict binary that has emerged in the critical analysis of the post-political urban condition. Focusing on the interstitial spaces existing between consensus and conflict reveals a more relational dynamic that positions consensus and conflict as co-constitutive and continuously being shaped by the performance of politics by state and non-state actors. Critiques of the post-political tend to fail to engage with the conditions that lead to citizen actors acting in political ways beyond the formal processes of planning and decision-making, or when consensus or conflict is used by oppressive politics to produce exclusion and reproduce inequality. In addition to introducing the five papers appearing in this special issue, in this opening editorial we argue the need to cast attention towards the new expressions of political participation generated by different citizen actors. Critically engaging with these varied expressions may reveal new ways of conceptualising participation that can create new informal spaces where injustices and inequalities are voiced and the structures and hegemonies created exposed.

Key words: post-politics, participation, consensus, conflict, Rancière, Mouffe

## **Between consensus and conflict**

Recent papers published in *Planning Theory* have questioned the restrictive nature of the communicative planning – agonistic planning binary by highlighting how such a polarisation may serve to destabilize the possibilities of participatory planning (Bond, 2011; Inch, 2015; Roskamm, 2015; Yamamoto, 2017). There is also a growing concern that post-politics is compromising planning in those governance contexts in which neoliberal orthodoxy currently dominates. Under these conditions participatory processes are often being designed to deform, displace, defer and diffuse emergent critical and oppositional discourse in the planning of contemporary cities that may arise outside of the formal planning process (Metzger, 2017; Allmendinger, 2016; Metzger et al, 2015; Legacy, 2016; Blühdorn, 2013; Bylund, 2012; Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010).

In this post-political landscape, Chantal Mouffe asserts that any real form of political conflict, beyond superficial technicalities, can only arise when challenges are waged against the dominant hegemony which manifest in the policies, practices and ways of knowing that structure the dominant (neoliberal) form of planning of cities and regions. Opening up this notion of conflict to different conceptualisations around politics, Jacques Rancière takes a different view to Mouffe and argues that conflict, in the form of what he calls ‘politics’, arises with the claim for equality. In moments of politics, this conflict lays bare the ‘scandal of democracy’ in the delivery of equality and exposes the reality that in western liberal democracies and elsewhere, equality is a project that is far from complete, and must be continuously struggled for (see further Metzger, 2017).

In times of growing global and local inequalities, it is tempting to assume that seeking direct conflict is the necessary process through which a radical form of democracy and a progressive form of planning can be achieved. Further, as recent global events show, and as Dikeç (2017) recently argued, democracy without the scrutiny and testing of its boundaries through conflict will most certainly propagate exclusion, marginalisation and racialisation of space. But we must also be cautious not to over-generalize, recognizing that conflict can also result in the further oppression of some populations.

The complexity of the conflict and consensus relationship suggests that it is no longer appropriate to fashion either consensus or conflict as one being more desirable than the other. In episodes of conflict, progressively motivated or otherwise, conflict and consensus present as a dichotomous relationship that planners must negotiate (Bylund, 2012). In responding to the debates in *Planning Theory* and in referencing the changing political landscape we inhabit today, we explore in this special issue the *problematique* of the consensus and conflict binary, which at its core, fails to engage with the

relational dynamic that places conflict and consensus as co-constitutive, and shaped by politics. The binary also does not engage with the conditions that inspire politicisation by citizens that may manifest when planning processes break down, or when consensus or conflict is leveraged by oppressive politics to exclude certain populations from the city or continue to plan cities in ways that privileges profit maximisation, privatization and commercialisation.

We need to find new expressions of political participation by different citizen actor groups that may challenge the post-political urban condition, and produce new inclusive, equal and kinder urban imaginaries. This is a time when ideological difference, as well as diversity of culture, ethnicity, and spatial geography are producing complex urban and regional politics that are changing the way cities, regions and even nations are governed. These new participatory politics will certainly build upon processes of both seeking conflict against oppressive patterns of dominance of urban areas and populations, while at the same time also attempt to form platforms of consensus to build the necessary coalitions that can challenge these existing, troublesome trends.

### **Political participation in the post political city**

Much has been written about the need to embrace a more radical form of planning (Miraftab, 2009), democracy (Mouffe, 1995) and politics (Swyngedouw, 2018). Planning in western cities has been compromised by the managerial governance logic structured under neoliberalism, the impacts of which are explored in case studies showing how the political is narrowed through consensus-generating processes of participation, and how conflict is generated in the city (Gualini et al, 2015; Gualini, 2015). The current post-political formats of participation offered to citizens circumscribe the input they have on these processes to such a degree that any real ambition to have an impact demands that they organize outside and against the managerial processes of state power. In the search for the political proper, and in the context of actually existing inequality in cities, there is interest in seeking out 'egalitarian-emancipatory process[es]' (Swyngedouw, 2018, p. 168).

Critiques of the post-political in *Planning Theory* have highlighted the different ways planning engages with questions of power, justice, difference, equity, politics and the political. These debates have tended to invoke a Mouffian perspective to render visible the conflicts that arise when counter-hegemonic challenges seek to uncover social inequalities, acknowledge difference, and foreground when deep-seeded conflicts are subordinated or de-legitimised by the state (Hillier, 2003; Purcell, 2009). Through a critical focus on the role of agonism, Mouffe (2000) questions the role conflict plays in planning, and the limits exhibited by consensus-based planning.

Mouffe (2000, p. 32) argues against ever being able to achieve a general political consensus without obfuscating and repressing remaining deep differences in world-views and political values between ideologies, which – with time – will inevitably resurface in destructive forms if unrecognized. As an antidote to these dangerous tendencies, she instead proposes a move towards agonism – an open struggle between ideological adversaries – which she argues is the basis for a vibrant democracy. Positioning agonism in relation to consensus, Mouffe (2013, p. 7) goes further to argue that “Too much emphasis on consensus, together with aversion towards confrontations, leads to apathy and to a disaffection with political participation”.

Heeding Mouffe’s calls to embrace a radical form of democracy, research in planning has gone into seeking case study examples that illuminate the emancipatory potential of agonism (Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014). Agonism’s potential has often been searched for in the grass-roots conflicts that challenge the structures of planning, where practices and processes marginalise and oppress citizens (see McAuliffe and Rogers this issue). For Mouffe, there is no retreat from the state. What is needed is instead a direct engagement with changing the politics of the state.

Another post-foundationalist philosopher shaping the way planning theory thinks about political participation can be found in the work of Jacques Rancière. He describes the state as ‘police’; as a disciplining actor that seeks to retain its hegemony. To this end, Rancière argues that we are in a state of post-democracy which has been allowed to proliferate largely unchecked in western democracies. Rancière’s point of departure from Mouffe is in the treatment of politics. He sees democracy as less a phenomenon that views politics through the prism of adversaries, but instead argues that politicisation is not attached to identity but is predicated upon claims for equality which can be episodic, but no less powerful. As Van Wymeersch, Vanoutrive and Oosterlynck (2019) argue in their paper presented as part of this special issue, the political subject in planning is a subject in the making and is involved in an open-ended process of dis-identification “from a given symbolic order”.

Whether a Rancièrian or Mouffian perspective of democratic politics is embraced, discussion about locating the political in planning has produced critiques of communicative planning, which have tended to draw on readings of Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality. There are concerns about how a superficial communicative ethics has been co-opted into the neoliberal governance orthodoxy (Purcell, 2009). This has prompted debates about the decentring of the state in planning and the blurring of responsibility between the public and the private (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012) and has created new challenges related to democratic representation in the decision-making processes shaping cities (Raco, 2014). Participation would be designed into planning processes and stage-managed to build buy-in and legitimacy for planning decisions (Metzger, 2017; Allmendinger,

2016; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012). New participation techniques ranging from citizen panels and juries to information-communication technology are predicated on a consensus-model of decision-making. These techniques do not necessarily allow for critical engagement with the prevailing capitalist and economic growth logics that underpin policy and city-making in many cities.

Consensus processes designed to manage conflict would suppress the political, preventing citizens from questioning and challenging the dominant planning orthodoxy. The processes that do remain may offer opportunities for limited citizen engagement, still placing considerable demands on citizens as political subjects (Inch, 2015), without creating the opportunity for that participation to fundamentally challenge hegemony or for people to make claims towards greater equality. This renders participatory planning as nothing more than an apparatus of government, shaped by the formal processes of planning, and offered by the state when it invites its citizens to participate (Miraftab, 2009). This undermines the radical potential and transformative energy to change institutional cultures and to reduce inequality in cities and regions.

### **The contemporary challenge**

Since the uprisings in 2011, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit, extreme weather events associated with climate change and the rise of alt-right and left movements, conflict in cities perpetuated by the inequality produced in the production of urban environments has reached a new level of intensity. This intensity, a product of spatial and social inequality, is generating new questions about how urban planning, planning practitioners and planning theory might respond to this changing context (Trapenberg-Frick et al, 2018; Barry et al, 2018; Rivero, 2017).

In the context of these complex challenges, the post-political condition poses even greater risks at a time when there are now many human and planetary injustices. Allowing the state to continue to embrace de-politicising policies, practices and spatial development while employing decision processes that seek to diffuse efforts by citizens to politicise the police would have significant detrimental impacts. Dikeç (2017, p7) writes in his book *Urban Rage: The revolt of the excluded* that “Urban uprisings are political in that they expose patterns, dynamics and structures of exclusion and oppression that have become routine and normalised” and are thus political events. Joining Dikeç in drawing inspiration from the recent number of political insurgencies witnessed in cities globally, Swyngedouw (2018) in his recent book calls for an insurgency against the post-political, and he offers his imaginary of a living in-common mode of urban existence that would revolutionise the uneven geographies of capitalism. He writes, that new political subjectivities are needed to challenge the presumption of equality presented in the current form of democracy and calls for “slow but

unstoppable production of new forms of spatialization quilted around materializing the claims of equality, freedom and solidarity” (Swyngedouw, 2018, p 142).

Finding ways to move beyond the challenges of the post-political condition towards the production of a new participatory politics is needed. The challenge this presents for planning and planning theory is to develop new ways of thinking about planning that allows ‘planning to plan’ and for citizens to be political in these deeply conflictual times and complex urban contexts (see McClymont this issue).

### **Moving beyond the post-political**

This special issue critically explores the ‘interstitial space’ (Steele and Keys, 2015, p113) between consensus and conflict. Our point of departure here is to build and extend the debate by critically exploring in theoretical and empirical detail, the political spaces that exist both in and between the polarised notions of consensus and conflict that has framed much of the preceding debate around the politics and post-politics of planning. The questions the papers in this issue engage with are fourfold and they are: (1) how can we move beyond treating ‘consensus’ and ‘conflict’ as a binary in planning; (2) what political possibilities emerge from the spaces in and between the conflict and consensus binary in planning that disrupt the post-political framing; (3) which contemporary theoretical contributions / strands of theoretical research can inform and support further research on this line of inquiry, and; (4) which possible shifts in understanding does this imply and what kind of research programs can be developed in order to pursue them.

The five papers presented as part of this special issue critically engage with the consensus and conflict binary from different perspectives, each challenging the parameters from which we view this dichotomy. Presenting a mix of theoretical propositions and empirical interpretations, at the forefront in all papers is the challenge of charting a radical form of planning that is cognisant of the conditions that create episodes of conflict and counter-hegemonic assertions and how these can be used to generate new politics both within the state and in civil society.

To begin, Katie McClymont in her paper is motivated by a growing research gap in exploring how planners might deliver better outcomes in a post-political context. By drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and his ideas of virtue ethics, McClymont is seeking to link creative conflict of agonistic/dissensus-based planning theory with ideas of ethical judgement and she does so by challenging us to consider the substantive content that lies behind terms such as ‘justice’ and ‘social equity’ which can often remain tacit in debates about planning. MacIntyre’s concept of virtue ethics allows planning theory to engage questions of values and bring them into conversation with “ontologically anti-foundational critiques of the post-political” (p. 3). Like the other papers,

McClymont seeks to unsettle the dichotomy between consensus and conflict, by arguing that the critiques of consensus that punctuate planning theory are not themselves ontological critiques, but critiques about the application of consensus. To this end, she calls on planning scholars to embark on a project of developing a framework that engages with disagreement, as well as with the “possibility of shared moral reasoning about situated outcomes” thereby acknowledging that there are synergies across agonistic democracy and virtue ethics (p. 15). This allows for substantive judgements to be made and applied to locally-situated problems that does not dismiss the presence of difference and conflict.

In their paper, McAuliffe and Rogers extend the debate about ethics by arguing that conflict exists because there is not one universal notion of morality. Their paper offers a critique of Mouffe by arguing that agonistic pluralism provides little insight into the motivations informing the plurality of subject positions. This critique is directed in the way Mouffe addresses power. Arguing for a post-consensus focus on conflict, McAuliffe and Rogers look to produce “a more efficacious engagement with value” (p. 3) to understand how conflict negotiation occurs by drawing on theories of value and value pluralism. They do so by examining the conditions that precipitate a transition from antagonism to agonism. By drawing on a case of a Residents Action Group in Sydney Australia, they assert that value pluralism can inform the development of a more “comprehensive pluralist ontology” (p.15) that can generate a stronger conceptualisation of participation in the context of urban development.

Ormerod and MacLeod in their paper seek to show how post-democratic processes are actually political accomplishments by the State. This offers a departure from the earlier papers where the focus is on the state apparatuses that exist because the state is post-political. But rather it goes further by arguing that the de-politicising efforts of the state are an act of politics. Examining the formation of entrepreneurial municipal housing strategies in Gateshead (northeast England), Ormerod and MacLeod use an in-depth and place-based study to conceptualise the persistence of politics at the level of local government with respect to municipal housing governance. The authors show that the strategy was generated by a process of political decision-making involving what they describe as “cyclical manipulation” (p.16) of the creation of consensus and a steering of the participatory planning processes in a way that de-amplify and repress opposition. In their analysis they generate insights into the state’s potential to re-democratise state representation in a way that can re-legitimise the state’s action and help it to move beyond the post-political condition.

The paper by Paccoud takes the departure from post-politics further by examining the role of the state revolutionary as a way of presenting how politics is challenged within the state. Drawing on the work of Alain Badiou, Paccoud conceptualises political subjectivity as an act that might be contained within

the state. He does this by interpreting Haussmann's action as a transformative act of politics generating through his actions. Paccoud argues that the idea of the state revolutionary has much to offer scholarship examining the politics of planning by helping to unsettle the dichotomy between consensus and conflict. This moves the debate forward and into a space that allows us to avoid 'state phobia' by asking how can it be possible to articulate confidence and authority within planning practices aiming to reverse deep structural inequalities? Moreover, Paccoud asks, what could a planning practice that follows a state revolutionary approach look like today? (p. 16).

The final paper by Van Wymeersch, Vanoutrive and Oosterlynck argues that there is a risk of over-ontologising the question of democratic politics. This is caused by an over-emphasis of ontological differences, which might result in our failure to engage with the empirical realities that show that there are different approaches to democratic politics, and that these different approaches can occur at different phases of the participatory planning process or even simultaneously. The authors argue that it is important to consider the different actors involved in spatial planning processes, and how their different understandings of participation might be informed. By drawing on Rancière's notion of political subjectification grounded in equality they examine the empirical complexities of "actually existing citizen participation" (p. 3). Looking at the case of the Living Street Programme in Ghent, their paper shows how a theoretically informed empirical analysis can explain the often ambivalent and contentious nature of participatory planning trajectories by referring to how different involved actors operate on different understandings of democratic politics (p. 19).

## **Conclusion**

In the context of planning theory, the contemporary challenge facing planning practitioners and scholars is to reimagine participation in a way that engages critically and productively with consensus and conflict and can rise to the significant challenge and complexity that social-spatial inequality, climate change and poor governance raises for planning. Further – to confront this challenge - more work also needs to be given to theorising political participation that does not dismiss consensus, including how consensus might help inform the development of progressive coalitions. This theorization could help develop a more conscious understanding of the role consensus, understood as an always precarious and temporary achievement, can play in planning today, to protect progressive planning policies and the right to the city that can go under attack, as we've seen in North America, parts of Europe and Australia in recent years. Recognising that not all rights and inclusions are experienced equally, there is scope to consider the conditions that are inciting conflict and its politics. Political participation can reveal the injustices, intervene in the formal processes of planning,



or create new informal spaces where these injustices and inequalities can be heard and the structures and hegemonies it creates exposed.

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