

Protest in the Park

Preliminary Thoughts on the Silencing of Democratic Protest in the Neoliberal Age

Ronan Paddison

On a crisp morning in March 2009, I took part in a demonstration against a proposal to install a novel recreational facility proposed for a major historic park in Glasgow. The brainchild of a commercial company, the 'Go Ape' facility takes participants high into the canopy of the trees and through a variety of experiences that – *judging* from the opinions of those who had used similar facilities elsewhere in Scotland – is fun. It is an experience which does not come cheap. The issue of financial exclusion aside for now, for the protestors its installation in Pollok Park was intrusive; it was not only that screams of masochistic pleasure would permeate an otherwise peaceful area of the park, but that it would be invasive of one of the last remaining areas of forest within a park which had been progressively eroded through earlier planning developments. This, combined with the fact that Pollok Park is a major green lung which at its northern tip brings a relatively wild space within less than three miles of the city centre, meant that it was perhaps inevitable that the proposal would attract opposition.

The demonstration was fixed by its timing to coincide with the site visit to the park arranged for the councillors on the City's Planning Committee by the Council's planners, the purpose of which was to acquaint the decision-makers with the nature of the development and its environmental setting. The demonstrators, of which there were about 30, were uninvited – and as it turned out unwelcome hangers on. We were a motley crew: from unemployed factory worker to university professor, to mothers with pushchairs, the elderly as well as the young; some were local activists that council officials would describe pejoratively as the 'usual suspects', recidivist participants in local politics, while others had little history of political involvement and would consider themselves apolitical. The common denominator was that all of us were concerned with what appeared to yet another proposal that privatized public space and had, to varying degrees, been involved in earlier protests against Go Ape.

Yet, that we were only there by sufferance, as far as the councillors were concerned, became readily apparent – we had certainly not been 'greeted' by the councillors, acknowledged in the sense that Young¹ gives as an essential preliminary to any deliberative process of engagement. At the periodic stops in the visit at which the planner would explain what development was envisaged, the invitation to pose questions was only extended to those on the council. My own attempt to ask a question went unheeded – it was ruled 'out of order' – as were those of others. The sole exception to our being treated as non-persons was a single councillor from the opposition.

From the outset as the excluded it was inevitable that our presence would reflect the unequal power relations between elected representatives, their officials and ordinary citizens, reflecting in turn the tensions between representative and participatory modes of democratic engagement. Further, those who control the agenda, and by implication also control what is not on the agenda and thus the realm of non decision-making, wield considerable power.² Yet, if we were relatively powerless in being 'outside' the formal rule book, what is equally true is that performance itself can challenge how political agendas unfold. Our performance, even if muted by the formal procedures, could politicize the issue where the council had sought to project the proposal as common sense³, as beyond reasonable question and thus beyond debate,

merely 'technical'.

The events that morning, together with the other meetings and demonstrations that took place to oppose the Go Ape proposal need to be understood against the wider politics of the city – the Council is effectively a 'one party city' led by Labour, the ruling party for all but eighteen months since 1950 – which in Glasgow, as in many other cities, have come to be dominated by the practices of entrepreneurial governance David Harvey discussed some two decades ago⁴. Following the lead of Mouffe⁵, Žižek⁶, Rancière⁷, and others, here I want to explore whether the politics of the city has in fact become a post-political and post-democratic configuration where, as geographer Erik Swyngedouw outlines, "the post-political condition is one in which consensus has been built around the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism as an economic system" – that is, "a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars [by mobilizing] the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content."⁸

"[C]ontrary to popular belief that these forms of neo-liberal urban governance widen participation and deepen democracy", Swyngedouw insists "that this post-political condition in fact annuls democracy, evacuates the political proper - i.e. the nurturing of disagreement through properly constructed material and symbolic spaces for dissensual public encounter and exchange - and ultimately perverts and undermines the very foundation of a democratic polis."⁹

Supplanting it, consensual managerial policies are "predicated upon new formal and informal institutional configurations [...] often with the explicit inclusion of parts of the state apparatus [...] a governance arrangement that consensually shapes the city according to the dreams, tastes and needs of the transnational economic, political, and cultural elites [...] that prefigure a particular form of urbanity"¹⁰, an urban order which does not permit contestation precisely because of its threat to consensus?

Was the protest against the Go Ape proposal as the performance of resistance at odds with a post-political thesis? As an historical glance over the last few decades would show, the Go Ape protest was just one of a myriad of oppositions that have bubbled up in Glasgow, just as they do in any city, to challenge how the city is to be reconstructed and the policy orthodoxy more generally. If the politics of the city is increasingly invested in a process of "the evacuation of the properly political (democratic) dimension from the urban"¹¹, annulling democracy for a high degree of "consensual agreement on the existing conditions and the main objectives to be achieved [...] within selectively inclusive participatory institutional or organizational settings"¹², implying a common purpose and shared values amongst participants, then why? And what strategies have been adopted to ensure that government is projected through such consensual managerial policies?

Furthermore, in adopting neoliberal policies, is a new expression of neopopulist governance emergent in this 'Governance-beyond-the-State'? Swyngedouw notes that "[p]opulism invokes 'THE city' and 'THE (undivided) people' as a whole in a material and discursive manner". This "[u]rban populism is also based on a politics of 'the people know best' (although the latter category remains often empty, unnamed), supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy, and

advocates a direct [though fictive] relationship between people and political participation". As such, "populism cuts across the idiosyncracies of different forms of expressions of urban life, silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and papers over fundamental conflicts of interest by distilling a common threat or challenge", customarily invoking "the spectre of annihilating apocalyptic futures" where the whole of urban life as we know it is under threat from potential catastrophes "if we refrain from acting (in a technocratic-managerial manner) now." This "enemy is always externalised and objectified [e.g. 'non-competitiveness'], examples of fetishized and externalized foes that require dealing with if a new urbanity is to be attained". Importantly, populism is expressed in particular demands that remain particular and foreclose democracy, and, according to Swyngedouw, "are always addressed to the elites. Urban populism is not about [obliterating] the elites, but calling on the elites to undertake action."¹³

How the post-political thesis has been articulated by Rancière, Žižek and others and how it has been developed by Swyngedouw is not unproblematic. Talk of the 'new' – a new style of politics – courts the risk of highlighting what appears novel but represents more a continuity, albeit one expressed in alternative terms. Nor does the denial of true political debate deny its emergence in the interstices, in in-between spaces that have not yet come under the entrepreneurial gaze of the (local) state or in spaces where effective resistance can be mounted. These caveats are important to bear in mind in the following discussion in which it is argued in two propositions that through the rise of urban entrepreneurialism and its populist advocacy a new style of urban governance may be emergent.

Emergent Styles of Urban Governance: Two Propositions

Proposition 1: Urban Entrepreneurialism as a Post-Political Configuration

It is two decades since David Harvey published his seminal article on the shift towards urban entrepreneurialism as the emergent orthodoxy underpinning how cities were becoming governed in an increasingly globalised and competitive world¹⁴; that in "fierce competition with other cities, city governments become curators of their own image as they coordinate aesthetic strategies in a desperate attempt to divert currents of global financial capital."¹⁵ However, "[c]ontrary to the mainstream argument that urban leaders and elites mobilize such competitive tactics as a response to the assumed inevitability of a neo-liberal global economic order, [Swyngedouw] insist[s] that these strategies in fact construct and consciously produce the very conditions that are symbolically defined as global urbanism."¹⁶

Hitherto, urban government had been portrayed as an essentially managerial task defined around the processes of planning and managing the city, providing infrastructural, social and cultural services essential to its maintenance, resolving problems of resource allocation, and arbitrating on issues such as planning conflicts. Globalisation and the rise of competitive urbanism was accompanied by the new orthodoxy of neoliberal governance defined by the shift from government to governance and a raft of policy initiatives aimed at reviving local economies including privatization, deregulation and liberalization. For Harvey, urban

entrepreneurialism – expressed through the reproduction across cities of enterprise zones, the advent of place marketing and the competition to hold cultural and sport spectacles, the privatization of public services, the construction of waterfront development – was “embedded in the logic of capitalist spatial development in which competition seems to operate...as an external coercive force”.¹⁷ His arguments were persuasive and, from the experience of the subsequent decades, prophetic: urban governance became disciplined into (and re-produced) an assumption that abstaining from competitive urbanism was neither an economic nor a political option.

Several decades of urban neoliberal governance have amassed a barrage of evidence demonstrating that its practice is socially divisive and that it has resulted in increasingly polarized and divided cities. This interpretation of urban change is not uncontested – the debate surrounding the changing class structure of world cities and whether this is reflected in evidence of increasing polarization, for example¹⁸, or the benefits resulting from the use of culture to ‘regenerate’ the city, for another.¹⁹ However, it is precisely because of how neoliberal practices become rolled out that their impacts harbour differential benefits which are fore-closed to particularised subjects of demand within the framework of existing relations; that is, reduced to localised appeals over resources placing the hegemony of neoliberalism beyond politics, with Žižek warning “the point is that we now seem to believe that the economic aspect of power is an expression of intolerance.”²⁰ Whereas a genuine politics “implies the recognition of conflict as constitutive of the social condition”: “A true political space is always a space of contestation, in the name of equality, for those who have no name or place ... the space for those who are not-All, who are uncounted and unnamed, not part of the ‘police’ (symbolic, social, state) order, where they claim their right to the polis.”

As Žižek warns, the essentially “post-political approach has achieved hegemonic currency, the only acceptable line of resistance today is that of supposedly marginalized voices to a mysterious capital power, manifested in the fight for the acceptance of such voices. As this resistance itself now becomes the hegemonic norm, the root (Real) of global capitalist antagonism is pushed into the background.”²¹

Historically, the politics of the city became played out around questions of distribution and redistribution; the dominant political cleavage came to be represented by tribal divisions between Right and Left. Thus, the election of ‘welfarist’ parties saw the initiation of redistributive policies which sought (for example) to ameliorate housing conditions for the working class. In post-World War II Britain, much more extensive programmes of social housing construction, accompanied by other social welfare reforms, became part of the Fordist deal. Local government, particularly the major city councils, became deeply implicated in the delivery of the local welfare state; it was ‘big government’ operating at the local scale in which city governments were the key institutions through which urban politics was conducted. If during its heyday the Fordist consensus was broadly subscribed to by the Right as well as Leftist parties, this did not mean that urban politics did not become split along partisan lines reflective of socio-economic class. Nor is it meant to imply that redistributive measures were not the outcome of class struggle, but that it was through City Hall that such changes were concretised.

The Fordist crises of the early 1970s were to mark the beginning of a new phase of local politics. Under the ‘postmodern turn’ – expressed as the transformation of ‘politics’ into ‘cultural politics’²², otherwise the subsumption of post-’68 ‘artistic critique’²³ – there were seismic shifts in the nature of the (local) state accompanied by the unravelling of the state-society relationships centred around state welfarism and the

redefinition of the relationships between state, market and society. It is these shifts which for Harvey became associated with the emergence of urban entrepreneurialism as the state sought to redefine its position in relation to a new round of capitalist development. These changes were accompanied by others, the effect of which was to dramatically reshape the relationships between state and society at the local level. The shift from government to governance changed the structure of how cities were governed; if urban governments continued to be major actors the shift to governance, the development of managerial partnership working, the quangoisation²⁴ of local economic development and other innovations, meant that the governing of cities was now apportioned between a complex array of institutions, many of which lay outside the conventional play of local democracy represented by liberal democratic institutions. Other shifts were to mark out the changed world of British urban politics in the last decades of the twentieth century, in particular the ‘Third Way’ metamorphosis of dominant Left/Right party politics and voting alignments of earlier decades, and the rise of identity and issue-based politics and its crowding out of class as the prime cleavage around which (city) politics focused.

These shifts summarise some of the changes associated with the political turn initiated by the end of Fordism. Most have been the subject of considerable debate which a listing is unable to do justice. The point to be emphasized is the fundamentally different world in which emergent neoliberal governance was to be defined and operate within from its Fordist counterpart. Certain principles of government were to remain: for one, the continued centrality given to (local) representative democracy as a key means through which the governance of the city was to be conducted. In what many contemporary observers argued as a progressive assault on local democratic institutions initiated during the Thatcher years culminating in the abolition of the major metropolitan councils in England, including London, even such reforms were not able to supplant the place of urban government. Further, towards the end of the 1980s and during Thatcher’s third term, the play of class politics became performed spectacularly through the poll tax²⁵. Yet, both the reform of local government structure and of the system of local taxation were part of the wider unfolding canvas of neoliberal transformations affecting how cities were governed and the changing relationships between state, market and civil society.

It is against this background, particularly since the election of New Labour in 1997, that the post-political configuration is to be understood. Post-politics²⁶ is not meant to be understood in ‘endist’ terms, as the end of politics. Indeed, post-political theorists, such as Chantal Mouffe, would argue that politics – as the construction of the political communities in which we wish to live – is always in construction and contested. Rather, post-politics refers to the emergence of managerial consensus politics which for New Labour had its conceptual foundations in Third Way resolutions;²⁷ and as Swyngedouw argues, presents “a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars”.²⁸ That is: “The post-political ... describes a space of political operation structured by choices relating to micro-political procedures, administrative apparatuses and technocratic management. Operating wholly within the shrunken coordinates of neoliberalism, political agency is constrained to nothing more than a shadow play where decisions

can only tinker with the edges of a system whose core ideological structure remains inviolable”²⁹.

Žižek’s contention is that the struggle of multicultural identity-politics has had a depoliticizing effect, a “transformation of ‘politics’ into ‘cultural politics’, where certain questions are simply no longer asked ... like those concerning the nature of relationships of production, whether political democracy is really the ultimate horizon, and so on ... Take a concrete example, like the multitude of studies on the exploitation of either African Americans or more usually illegal Mexican immigrants who work as harvesters here in the U.S. I appreciate such studies very much, but in most of them – to a point at least – silently, implicitly, economic exploitation is read as the result of intolerance, racism. ...the point is that we now seem to believe that the economic aspect of power is an expression of intolerance. The fundamental problem then becomes ‘How can we tolerate the other?’ Here, we are dealing with a



false psychologization. The problem is not that of intrapsychic tolerance...”³⁰

In the post-political what is discussed on the political agenda is pre-ordained on the basis of fundamental axioms – e.g. of power relationships, how the economy should be organised – being unquestioned and unquestionable. “In claiming to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration ... what remains is only the efficient administration of life... almost only that.”³¹ Thus, the inevitability of neoliberalism or the status of liberal democracy as the principle around which the processes of government should be organised become unquestionable in the post-political formation (Žižek proposes we instead summon the courage to reject liberal democracy as a master-signifier and a main political fetish, and seek “actual universality”); it achieves hegemonic currency³², conforming to what Bourdieu refers to as “the common-sense of the day”³³, the *doxa*, the contemporary unquestionable orthodoxy.

Lahoud: “Swyngedouw clearly marks out the topography of the post-political landscape: the entrance of a managerial logic into all aspects of life, the reduction of government to administration where decision making is seen as a question of expertise and not of political position, the diffusion of governance into a host of non-state actors, the brand management of urban space, the predominance of consensual understandings of political action, the particularization of political demands, and the termination of social agendas in planning.”³⁴

With this “evaporation of dissent” in contemporary urban governance a “neoliberal governmentality ... has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement and technocratic management” (Swyngedouw³⁵); establishing what is ‘common-sense’ inevitably requires synthesizing

agreement.

For that reason, it is the engineering of this ‘consensus’ configuration that inevitably becomes of importance, and it is at this juncture that the arguments of the two propositions here elide into one another; that it is through the employment of techniques of neo-populism that the advantages of consensualism become socially and politically cemented. At the outset, though, Swyngedouw’s account emphasizes the *style* of politics that characterizes post-politics, the hollowing out of the political dimension: “the polis, conceived in the idealized Greek sense as the site for public political encounter and democratic negotiation, the spacing of (often radical) dissent, and disagreement, and the place where political subjectivation emerges and literally takes place, seems moribund. In other words, the ‘political’ is retreating while social space is increasingly colonised by policies (or policing).”

For Žižek: “The ultimate sign of post-politics in all Western countries is the growth of a managerial approach to government; government is reconceived as a management function deprived of its proper political dimension”³⁶. “[T]hat the way the political space is structured today more and more prevents the emergence of the act. But I’m not thinking of some metaphysical event... For me, an act is simply something that changes the very horizon in which it takes place, and I claim that the present situation closes the space for such acts.”³⁷ So it is not just that political debate is becoming curtailed as to how supposed collective decisions over specific policy concerns are to be made, rather, more fundamentally, whether those concerns have a site for public political encounter at all. Thus, the premises on which decision-making is made become excluded, yet it is precisely in their encounter that democratic negotiation might be transformative. The centring of managerial politics, then, accompanies the marginalization of real politics. “The problem for [Žižek] is that in politics, again, the space for an act is closing viciously.”³⁸

At this juncture it is useful to rehearse the extent to which urban neoliberal economic governance has become orthodoxy. Most analysts are in little doubt of “the entrance of a managerial logic into all aspects of life, the reduction of government to administration where decision making is seen as a question of expertise and not of political position, the diffusion of governance into a host of non-state actors, the brand management of urban space, the predominance of consensual understandings of political action, the particularization of political demands, and the termination of social agendas in planning.”³⁹ In a thoughtful paper⁴⁰, the US urbanist Robert Beauregard outlined the rules that defined local economic development as it had developed to date (1993) in the practices of local governments and not-for-profit organisations in the United States. Predictably, the attraction of inwards investment was the prime objective repeated across the organisations as the most overt measure that the locality was at least retaining, if not enhancing, its competitive position. Of secondary importance was the question of the quality of the jobs that were created, their pay status, their likely durability, so that the consequences of what forms of investment were being attracted, its longer term trajectory, and its equity implications were effectively marginalized as being the direct concern of local economic development. Place marketing was considered a vital tool particularly in that it could be used as the means of narrativising investor success, besides which it gave markers to what were successful strategies that might be used to influence future local economic development policy.

It would be over-simplistic to suggest that what Beauregard itemised as the key tenets of local economic development policy nearly two decades ago in the United States is simply repeated in experience nearly two decades later, whether in the US or elsewhere. Mirroring an earlier argument as to how competitive urbanism is a disciplining force, it is not just that economic

revitalization has replaced earlier key policies of city governments that – at least in much of western Europe – were more closely defined around the delivery of the local welfare state, but that policy innovation to improve the city’s competitive position has gained its own premium. Successive new policy tropes have become defined around local economic development – the rise of the knowledge economy, the adoption of clusters theory, and most recently the increasing use of culture as the means by which to foster economic growth – and through emulation rapidly been incorporated as part of the ‘new conventional wisdom’⁴¹. How these policy innovations become adopted will in practice vary, not least because of the different position cities occupy in the competitive ladder. Yet, fundamentally, how these policies fare in practice remains interpreted in similar terms to the primary aim identified by Beauregard, the attraction of inwards investment, a reality which has particular veracity for those cities where (re)establishing competitive position poses particular challenges. Amongst these, the generic (if somewhat elastic) category of ‘post-industrial cities’, are prime examples.

Of Glasgow, considerable evidence can be marshalled to argue that it is not only that economic regeneration of the city has become *the* key policy objective of the political elite, but that how the policy should be pursued has become deeply impregnated by neoliberal practices⁴². For the central tenet of the post-political thesis what is critical here is that this evidence points to how policy orthodoxy exists beyond political debate. Added to this is that it is through the city council, in its capacity as the lead actor amongst the network of partnerships, that economic development policies are delivered. In fact, recent changes by the Scottish Government to the role of Scottish Enterprise, the main quango charged with an economic development role, have further enhanced the role of local government. In other words, in spite of the assumption that the shift to governance involves the downplaying of the status of (local) government partly in favour of other institutions, recent experience in Scotland suggests that the status of the local democratic institutions based on the principle of representative democracy has been strengthened. Consequently, its ability to claim legitimacy through the electoral system, combined with the powers it has to address economic regeneration of the city and the pre-eminence given to the task, gives it the capacity to crowd out the feasibility of debate on the city’s development and the means, democratic participatory practice, through which it might be expressed. Limiting the boundaries to what is – *and what is not* – the subject of debate, one means by which consensus politics becomes defined, is simultaneously antithetical to the democratic polity; it is what Rancière and others have defined as postdemocracy.⁴³

It is not pretended here that the postpolitical thesis is unproblematic. In particular, it undervalues the role of human agency and of resistance in being able to challenge consensus politics. Its claim, then, to outlaw ‘real politics’ is not borne out by empirical reality; all cities have histories of local insurgency seeking to challenge orthodoxy. Clearly, too, its explanatory power calls out for much deeper empirical scrutiny than is possible here. Yet, the value of the thesis is in its ability to provide clues as to how ‘the protest in the park’ was marginalized by the representatives of the city council as beyond the boundaries of consensus politics. Its ability to do so is dependent on the second proposition underpinning emergent neoliberal practices in the city.

Proposition 2: Urban Entrepreneurialism and its Emergent Neo-Populism

Future historians of British urban politics looking back at the period between the 1980s and the present day may express some surprise that the palpable inequalities following from several decades of neoliberal governance did not result in more opposition on the streets. The poll tax riots apart, together with the Brixton and

Liverpool riots in the 1980s and the so-called race riots in northern English towns in 2001, what is paradoxical is that street protest in Britain has become more associated with the universal (global) and distant (Iraq) problems than it has ones that are rooted in structural inequalities and the local. That in the first decade of the twentieth century Britain is a more unequal society is amply evidenced through statistics⁴⁴. Precisely by their nature, cities become the most visible site of inequalities, where in the finer graining of the post-modern city relative poverty exists in closer propinquity to relative affluence than was the case in the more segregated, coarsely-grained Victorian city, a reality that reflects the progressive gentrifying of the city.

One possible line of explanation (to the absence of street protest) is to be sought in the changing relationships between state, market and civil society marked out by neoliberal governance through the emergence of a new style of urban politics, neo-populism. The linking of populism to neoliberal governance needs careful explanation; conventionally populism and liberalism would be considered as oxymoron to one another. Thus, populism and liberalism tend to have opposite conceptions of the state (maximal vs. minimal), nationality (ethnic vs. civic), human agency (social determinism vs. free will) and other key dimensions characterising state, market and society⁴⁵. Further, where political scientists tend to preface discussion of the concept by highlighting its ‘vagueness’⁴⁶, populism is highly contested. Its most widely quoted examples – from Latin America, in particular – have arisen as political movements aimed at correcting injustices and invoking an appeal to ‘the people’ as in opposition to an ‘enemy’, the elite. Thus, populist movements aim to meet redistributive goals, one of the more obvious apparent contradictions it raises in being used alongside neoliberalism. For Weyland⁴⁷, the re-emergence of new forms of populism in Latin America – Menemism in Argentina and Fujimorism in Peru – is not accidental, nor is it contingent, but rather it has become employed as a political strategy to accommodate neoliberal governance. The argument envisages two separate but interdependent spheres in which the political (neopopulist politics) exists parallel to the economic, the neoliberal marketplace. Critically, the role of the state is to bolster not just the marketplace but also itself through a strategy which is designed to weaken democracy, in other words to constrain opposition to the neoliberal project.

Such arguments have not been uncontested including amongst analysts of Latin American politics.⁴⁸ Clearly, too, it raises questions as to why electorates disaffected by neoliberalism – lower income groups – are willing in effect to vote for it. Tellingly, this is the same question as was posed earlier in relation to British cities, the apparent acquiescence of those less advantaged by neoliberalism who are simultaneously unwilling to challenge it politically, either through the ballot box or through direct action. At this point the neo-populist argument offers explanations through showing how neo-populism is being developed as a new style of politics.

Swyngedouw⁴⁹ has outlined the methods by which populism has emerged in a new guise as an integral part of the post-political formation. Fundamentally, the state – its component institutions, including city governments – is concerned with the advancement of the neoliberal project and more specifically, for the city, of meeting the exigencies of competitive urbanism. How, then, does city government develop neo-populism as a political strategy? Key here is the role of discourse and the employment of language that seeks to persuade that its policies are the only and appropriate course of action. In this debate, the threat is globalization whose confrontation is inescapable particularly as it affects everybody. This raises the possibility of talking of the city and its population in unitary terms, invoking *the city* and *the people*, and the need for a unified response to meet the challenges of globalization.

By constructing the latter as the ‘enemy’, it lays the blame on a force that is external to the city and by implication diverts focus from the problems of marginalization, injustices or unequal power relations that define the inequalities of the city. Yet, neo-populist strategies do not just emphasise the unity of the people but are active in demonstrating that the people are part of the political process, hence the emphasis given to political participation. How, though, participation is performed – and what issues are debated – becomes constrained to the agenda needed to pursue economic objectives. What becomes critical is the language, the signifiers, through which developmental objectives become expressed; in Laclau’s⁵⁰ terms the use of empty signifiers – constructs such as the ‘European city’, the ‘healthy city’, the ‘sustainable city’, terms that are ‘empty’ in the sense of having one particular meaning but which are capable of alternative interpretation – become a powerful means of projecting visions of the city. As empty signifiers, their apparent inclusiveness – directly reflecting their ambiguity – defies the legitimacy of their being challenged.

As a political strategy it is rich in the suggestions that empirical analysis should include. Simultaneously, it raises questions as to how such a strategy might be persuasive. Limiting the discussion here to the question of participation, the starting point of this paper, it is a question of *how* participatory practices are drawn into urban government/governance.

A hallmark of New Labour’s urban policies, and one which has been universally remarked upon, has been the frequency with which ‘community’ and ‘community participation’ have been invoked as essential to the transformative process.⁵¹ The development of Area Based Initiatives, normally operating at the neighbourhood or similarly local scale, were introduced; some to address specific needs, health, crime control, education, others with a broader remit, notably the comprehensive renewal, physical and social, of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. All co-opted community participation, albeit in different ways. Cities became criss-crossed by a complex mosaic of neighbourhood governance structures in which local participation was part of a partnership arrangement linked with state agencies.

Most observers of the trend have been critical, particularly of the ways in which, while the projects emphasized partnership and collaborative working, the reality was that often local participation came up against the buffers of unequal power relations.⁵² For its critics, the concept of governmentality was resorted to for explanation why and how participation was being emphasized through policy discourse⁵³: “political forces seek to give effect to their strategies..... through utilizing and instrumentalising forces of authority other than the ‘State’ in order to govern – spatially and constitutionally – ‘at a distance’” (Rose, 1996, 46). For Foucault, governmentality becomes the means by which the state has been able to progressively establish social control. It becomes exercised through the technologies of power the state has at its disposal, in particular its technical expertise and the skills of the professionals employed by the (local) state. Hence in orchestrating local planning the state’s local planners are able to organize how consultation takes place and offer expert advice, both particularly for their employer, the state. Rose’s post-structuralist analysis offers the connection between discourse and the ability to create governable subjects. Here, discourse is more than language but rather it denotes a way of acting and behaving. As Barnes *et al* argue⁵⁴, this opens up the possibility of exploring how discourse becomes the means of shaping behaviour and that specifically it becomes feasible to create “categories of public that are produced for the purposes of participation”. It is an argument that resonates with the power of discourse as it is used in populist politics.⁵⁵

The Constraints on Public Participation - Returning to the Protest in the Park

At this point we can return to the story of the ‘protest in the park’ to draw out some of the implications arising from the propositions that have been outlined in order to contextualize the episode, drawing in the interplay of local political processes (in Glasgow) which also help explain why otherwise legitimate protest could be effectively marginalised. The reality of protest is that it has invariably been marginalised by the state, particularly where it runs counter to the political priorities of the state. Rather, the argument of this paper centres around how the state seeks to marginalise opposition by championing its own project and through its ability to foreclose political debate. Again, the episode and the longer conflict of which it was part is a rich and complex story in which it is not possible here to present detailed empirical evidence or tease out the nuances of the power relationships that were to unfold. Here, attention is focused on those parts of the neopopulist strategy – the use of discourse and of governmentality – that seek to be persuasive of the city’s overall developmental policy objectives and simultaneously to be able to marginalize political opposition to it.

Fundamental to understanding why the city council enthusiastically supported the Go Ape woodland adventure is that it complemented the wider discourses within which the city is envisioned. Within the prime goal of economic regeneration, Glasgow has had to confront the physical, economic and social legacy of it having been one of Britain’s, and certainly Scotland’s, major industrial centres. The story of the city’s regeneration beginning with the marketing campaign ‘Glasgow’s Miles Better’ in the early 1980s is a familiar one, as was its proactive use of its winning of the designation ‘European City of Culture’ in 1990 to bolster its image.⁵⁶ Culture, too, it was propounded, could be used as the means of diversifying the economic base.⁵⁷ From the economic nadir of the early 1980s – at which point the city’s unemployment was consistently above 10% and well above the Scottish and UK averages, and at which time the city was all but absent from the tourist map – inroads into its perceived economic position have been made. But, “although unemployment levels are relatively low (in comparison to say 25 years ago), economic activity rates remain well below the national average”⁵⁸ – by 2007 Glasgow had the highest workless households in the UK (ONS) – and questions remain as to the impact of population dispersal – a spate of demolitions has seen the total amount of social housing reduced from 81,000 to under 62,000 by 2009⁵⁹. Simultaneously, the city’s marketing agency claims that Glasgow has become a major tourist destination within the ‘city break’ consumer market. Yet, as mentioned earlier following Beauregard⁶⁰, the job creation says little about the quality of the jobs⁶¹ – the actual decline of full-time work and the growth of a part-time labour market – and in spite of the physical transformation of parts of the city – the central area and the waterfront development, in particular – the city remains characterized by high levels of social deprivation⁶². Indeed, the assertive adoption of entrepreneurialism – the shift in the marketing of the city towards emphasizing retail consumption (‘Glasgow, Scotland with Style’) – has served to further polarize its social division, which some analysis have sought to articulate in revanchist terms⁶³, others in more exclusionary language⁶⁴.

It is an irony that the practice of neoliberalism is a disciplining force, not just for labour and more widely in its social ramifications, but also it would appear for its advocates and practitioners. Competitive urbanism functions as a ratchet within which cities become locked into an increasingly competitive process of bidding for inwards investment. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the bidding to hold mega-events, including major sports and cultural events. Glasgow is a prime, but increasingly common, example whose

record in the field within urban marketing circles is widely cited in paradigmatic terms.⁶⁵ The city’s marketing agency is engaged in an ongoing process of bidding to host events, major conferences, tourist attractions of different types, in which precisely because other cities are engaged in it, questioning the premise on which it is based is not a political option. As an entrepreneurial project – such competitive bidding operates under a ratchet effect with a high degree of institutional aggregation to accumulate marks of distinction and collective symbolic capital – the process has gathered increasing momentum. This, in turn means that it is a key, and increasingly important, item on the local political agenda. Questioning the strategy is political heresy.

In the efficacious discourses surrounding urban economic development, a consistent trend has been that cities should be ‘attractive’. Whether expressed through urban imagineering⁶⁶, ‘soft assets’⁶⁷, the ‘quality of place’⁶⁸ or through design⁶⁹, the essential narrative is that cities need to be ‘attractive places’ in which to live in order to be competitive. The Go Ape facility, and the council’s support of it, is part of the wider argument of constructing the ‘attractive city’ – while affirming market precedent for common good assets. Judged by its financial benefits for the city, the leasing of the land on which it would be built, the case for support was far from obvious. (Added to this, the city was to give leasehold rights to Go Ape, a private company, for a relatively long period; 21 years.) Rather, support was publicly expressed in terms of the amenity it would offer to both citizens and visitors and the improvement to the range of facilities in the park. It was anticipated that using the facility would be expensive (c. £20 per person per day entry) and, because of its implications for social inclusion, city officials negotiated that the company offer 2,000 free ‘rides’ to school children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city. Having such a facility, the city planning committee and its key officials also energetically argued, would contribute to the quest to making Glasgow a healthier city. It was an argument that connected with another policy trope around which the city’s future is projected through official discourse (‘Glasgow as a Healthy City in which to live’), emphasis to which has been given a pronounced fillip since the city’s successful bidding for the Commonwealth Games in 2014. In other words, the facility bolstered several key aspects of the official vision of the future Glasgow; the case for its support became indisputable.

In the post-political city the future is expressed as a consensual understanding; it does so through emphasizing the value of local participation as steering policy. As in other British cities, the city administration in Glasgow has innovated with a mix of participatory techniques to tawl for local opinion including citizens’ panels, opinion poll surveys which monitor council performance and attitudes (as, for example, to the holding of the 2014 Games and the ongoing progress achieved by the city council in meeting objectives) and questionnaires targeted at specific policy fields. In 2005 the (then) Leisure and Parks Department of the city council issued a consultation paper and questionnaire on the problems users had of the city’s parks and possible methods in which they could be improved. Of the latter, an overwhelming majority (somewhat predictably) gave their support to “improving the facilities in parks”; it was this response to an otherwise ‘apple-pie’ question that was to become a key popular mandate in justification for council support to the Go Ape application – and to other proposals affecting green spaces in the city.⁷⁰ Questionnaires were also used by the city council to elicit opinion specifically to the Go Ape facility; these too showed support for the proposal. It was not that such survey data could be challenged that is of importance here (which was the case), but rather that it was being used to manufacture consensus towards the proposal.

As a plethora of studies have shown, beginning with Arnstein’s⁷¹ still quoted ladder analogy, participation, particularly where it is initiated

through state-led practices, operates at different levels from the tokenistic to scenarios in which there is a real redistribution of power through local devolution⁷² or through the realisation of deliberative forms of democratic engagement⁷³. Realisation of the empowered participatory governance Fung and Wright highlight is the exception; clearly, pre-existing centres of institutional power, urban governments, will be reluctant to devolve decision-making powers substantively. Further, to do so would be to undermine the legitimacy representative modes of democratic practice are able to claim. If politics is the negotiation of conflict, the post-political formation is defined around its antithesis, that politics is a managerial task involving the identification of consensus. Limiting participation to relatively 'shallow' forms of democratic engagement averts the problems of conflict. For the city council, the knowledge gained through participation could become a tool of 'consensual persuasion' and simultaneously to bolster the legitimacy of state action. Its actions were the antithesis of the kinds of democratic engagement envisaged by Callon *et al*⁷⁴ and in particular of the 'hybrid forums' through which dialogue takes place.

The protest, on the other hand, reflected dissensus; its silencing needed to draw on the technologies of power the state could engage, demonstrating its ability to regulate how participation could, or could not, be part of the democratic process. For the elected city councillor the protest was a challenge to both the mandate the electoral process had given to the ruling administration to govern and as, has been argued, to the wider visions for the city's future development. The ability to marginalize protestors through their absent presence was possible through the technologies of power councillors could draw upon; the procedures for site visits – as in the park – were governed by regulations devised by the city council.

Many of these questions revert back to the fundamental questions that have consistently defined the politics of the city; who speaks for the city?; whose vision of the city is privileged and whose is not? As Harvey proposes: "The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization." In their new guise these questions form the core of the debates surrounding Lefebvre's dictum, 'The Right to the City'⁷⁵ (as contested as it may be for operating in a sphere of 'pseudo rights'). For neoliberalism the city is a key testing ground for innovative practice; what we need to know is how the state is accommodating these shifts and its impact on democratic processes in the city.

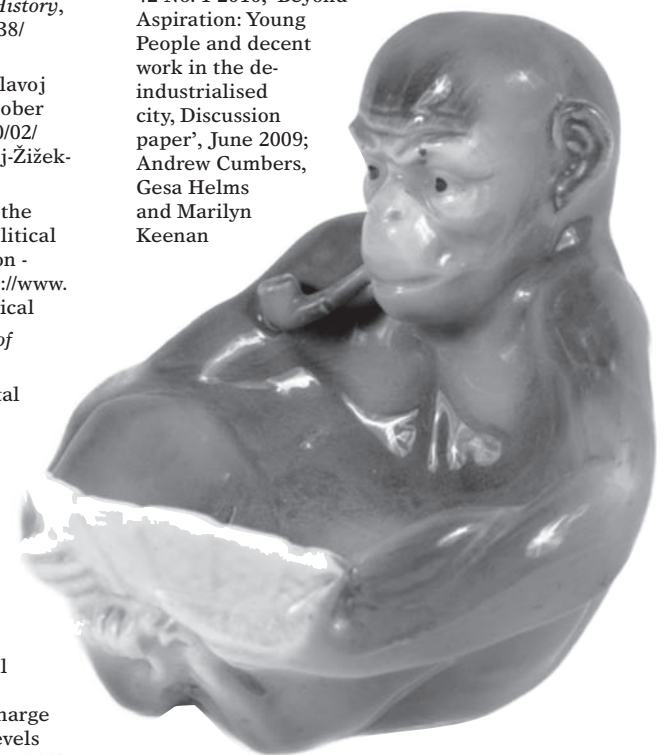
As an emergent style of politics, as an extension of governmentality, the discussion in this article is more exploratory and suggestive than it claims to be definitive. Both the concepts of the *post-political* and *neopopulism* are contested. Further, the argument needs empiricising more fully, particularly where contingency is acknowledged as key to identifying how the practice of urban governance unfolds. As a version of populist reasoning, how is advocacy expressed through language? How are 'the people' defined? How are the 'techniques of consensual persuasion' able to manufacture assent? Is the practice of urban politics becoming increasingly intolerant of dissension? How does leadership become critical⁷⁶ and what, if any, are the parallels to charismatic leadership linked to 'classic' forms of populism?⁷⁷

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Notes

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- 22 Where "certain questions - like those concerning the nature of relationships of production, whether political democracy is really the ultimate horizon, and so on - these questions are simply no longer asked." <http://www.scribd.com/doc/39642938/Žižek-and-the-Post-Political>
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- 24 Quangos are Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations. In the UK these are defined as a "body which has a role in the processes of national government but is not a government department or part of one, and which accordingly operates to a greater or lesser extent at arm's length from Ministers." See UK Public Bodies 1997 at www.official-documents.co.uk/document/caboffice/bodies97/bodies97.htm
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