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– INTERVENTIONS

– DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC OR POPULIST RABBLE:
Repositioning the City amidst Social Fracture

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Abstract

The current degree of social fracture that has attended the growing prevalence of populist movements calls into question the viability of democratic practices grounded in collective deliberation. Urban practitioners committed to democratic inclusion must confront the practical question of how to deal with a divided public. Any such effort must address longstanding and mutually reinforcing trends that have both aggravated social fragmentation and enabled the rise of populist regimes whose policies exacerbate divisiveness and inequity. These trends include economic restructuring and rising inequality, cultural division, and a post-truth trap resulting from disagreement over epistemological and ontological assumptions. We argue that, while local governments can play a role in addressing these dynamics, a more fundamental renewal of a meaningfully democratic polity depends on a capacity to help cultivate solidarity across difference. We then recast the city as a site of political encounter and experimentation that might enable both a re-examination of prevailing modes of public engagement and the emergence of solidarities and infrastructures through which populism might be challenged. Finally, we consider how a progressive urban politics of place might use populism as a point of departure for transforming urban futures.

Introduction

The recent rise of populism, in all its ideological permutations, reflects an alarming degree of social fracture and distrust in democratic governing institutions the world over. This development calls into question long-held assumptions in liberal democracies about the viability of inclusive public deliberation, even as it erodes our collective capacity to confront socioeconomic problems that have inspired populist discontent. This dilemma has figured prominently in cities, where some of these issues have been most sharply experienced and where the challenges of living together in difference have long been especially pronounced. In Brazil, for instance, the 2018 election of far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro and his strong electoral results in erstwhile centers of radical democratic innovation, such as the city of Porto Alegre (Abers, 1998; Avritzer, 2017) and in former strongholds of the Workers' Party, such as poor neighborhoods in the São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro peripheries (Bradlow, 2019), illustrate the current distrust, across economic classes, of democratic approaches to solving collective problems.

In this essay,[1] we address the relationship between the contemporary city and the current populist moment, paying attention to the role that urban practitioners

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1 An earlier version of this essay formed the basis for a workshop and roundtable entitled 'Democratic Public or Populist Rabble: Reconsidering an Equitable Path from Process to Outcomes in the Age of Trump' organized by the authors during the 57th Annual ACSP Conference, 12–15 October 2017, Denver, CO.

(policymakers, planners, advocates and organizers) might play in countering populism's corrosive effects. Although much of our discussion revolves around the recent rise of right-wing populism in the United States, it also applies—as some of our examples illustrate—across the ideological spectrum and beyond national boundaries. While a recent issue of IJURR (September 2019) engages with the changing spatial dynamics and political geographies of populism, here we provide a structural view of its causes and consider strategies for addressing the social fracture that allows it to take root.

In the next section, we examine ways in which populist movements threaten democratic institutions and practices, and then provide an overview of three mutually reinforcing dynamics that aggravate this threat. These dynamics include: (1) economic restructuring, rising inequality and an ensuing democratic deficit; (2) cultural divisions exacerbated by a multifaceted crisis of representation; and (3) a breakdown in communication across difference arising from disparate ontological and epistemological assumptions. In the final section, we argue that the city—both as a form of local governance and as a field of political action—can play a key role in the pursuit of approaches that might overcome these limitations. We focus on two sets of strategies grounded in the nurturing of solidarities across difference: situated deliberation and multi-scalar network formation. We cast urban actors as agents in that effort—an effort that includes the realignment of urban politics, grassroots mobilization, the rescaling of activism, and the provision of enabling infrastructure.

Understanding public fracture and populism

– Theorizing populism

The resurgence of populism over the past couple of decades has inspired numerous academic efforts to determine its cause and assess its effect on democratic institutions. The ideological, discursive and organizational variety of populist movements, as well as their occasional hybridity, have complicated attempts to group them under a unifying concept (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). Notwithstanding the lack of consensual definition for populism, most scholarship tends to agree on a set of shared features that link populist movements to the democratic challenges that characterize the current political landscape.

First, populism responds to a sense of crisis (Taggart, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). The nature of the crisis can vary, but the perception that it cannot be adequately addressed through conventional political institutions does not (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005; Panizza, 2005). The connection between politically intractable crises and the rise of populist leaders is well illustrated by the recent election of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, whose win was fueled, on the one hand, by a prolonged economic recession and rising crime rates, and, on the other, by highly publicized corruption scandals that delegitimated the government (Hunter and Power, 2019). In Italy, the populist Movimento 5 Stelle achieved a majority in parliament in 2018 as a grassroots, 'leaderless', anti-elite response to government corruption. By then, the national government's perceived inability to confront a housing affordability crisis and a surge in refugee claims had also fueled the rise of three right-leaning populist parties, all with an anti-immigration agenda: Lega Nord, Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia (Rossi, 2018).

The 'evocation of emergency radically simplifies the terms and terrain of political debates' and reinforces 'a general distrust of the complex machinery of modern governance and the complicated natures of policy solutions' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391). Accordingly, various scholars attribute the recent populist upswell to a sense of crisis that resulted from the uneven impacts of the post-2007 global economic downturn and from the effects of the neoliberal response that followed (Judis, 2016; Müller, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Second, populist movements come to associate perceived crises with a common set of symbols that engender a collective sense of identity that is then equated with

'the people' (Taggart, 2004; Laclau, 2005). Because of this identification, the apparent failure of government to confront populist concerns comes across as a derogation of the state's duty to represent the popular will, and it further erodes faith in the democratic apparatus (Taggart, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Third, the construction of 'the people' requires a constitutive 'other' that delineates the boundaries of the body politic by standing beyond them (Laclau, 2005; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Judis, 2016; Rancière, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). In some formulations, the 'other' consists of 'corrupt elites', an unspecified ruling class that governs without regard to 'the people' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). But the sense of democratic failure can revolve as well around the perceived tendency of the elite to favor a third group (e.g. immigrants or the undeserving poor) against which populist movements can also define themselves (Judis, 2016). In either case, the us/them framing that characterizes and foments populism entails a restrictive re-envisioning of the democratic public. Scholars argue that this process of 'othering' has been encouraged in recent decades by the ideological polarization of the media (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) and by the rise of identity politics (Müller, 2016).

Populist movements' identitarian logic, as well as their belief in the inadequacies of prevailing governing structures can have a destabilizing effect on the democratic system. Even so, the relationship between populism and democracy has been variously construed. For Müller, pluralist efforts to exclude portions of the citizenry from the political arena represent a degradation of democracy (*ibid.*). In contrast, Laclau (2005) regards populism as the means through which the political happens and through which radical alternatives are collectively asserted. Despite such differences, there is widespread agreement that pluralism does represent a challenge to democratic institutions. Mény and Surel (2002) conceptualize this challenge in terms of the tension between liberal and democratic principles. The former concerns universal principles and rights while the latter concerns the will of the people. Pluralism responds to constraints on popular will by attempting to impose democratic rule without regard for universal guarantees. Some scholars view this as a useful corrective against the undemocratic excesses of liberalism—as a platform for voices excluded from the political process (Judis, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Others argue that it runs the risk of undercutting the institutions and principles upon which the democratic system rests. Some critical theorists, in fact, share the view that self-described democracies have already lost many of their democratic attributes, and point as evidence to the increasing prevalence of political decisions that, because of ostensible crises, bypass the long road of democratic deliberation (Davidson and Iveson, 2015).

The circumvention of democratic processes often finds enthusiastic approval among supporters of populist leaders even (or especially) when it means defying the authority of legislative bodies controlled by the opposition. Donald Trump's extensive use of executive action and his constant threats to declare national emergencies or shut down the government, for instance, demonstrate to his base that he is willing to do whatever it takes to address real or manufactured crises. Likewise, supporters of Bolsonaro in Brazil and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines endorse these leaders' view that civil rights are secondary to public safety and applaud their willingness to combat crime by restricting due process.

Populist movements can occasionally constitute a challenge not just to existing government institutions but also to an entire governing establishment. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's open defense of the military regime that established a dictatorship in Brazil from 1964 to 1985 has been met with enthusiastic and widespread support. In the 2018 annual Latinobarometro survey of eighteen Latin American countries, Brazil showed the lowest levels of satisfaction with the performance of democracy, with only 9% of respondents being satisfied, a drop of 40 percentage points since 2010. Since 2015, the number of respondents who agree that 'Democracy is preferable to any other system of government' has decreased, while the view that 'For people like me, it doesn't matter

whether we have a democratic government or an authoritarian one' has increased (Hunter and Power, 2019).

Paradoxically, populism can also arise in response to the anti-democratic dynamics of de-politicization, such as those surrounding urban governing agendas that regard the neoliberal imperatives of inter-city competition as beyond debate (Žižek, 2009; Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017). Swyngedouw argues that such suppression of agonistic politicization—the exclusion of public demands from the sphere of agonistic disagreement—provokes populist outcries and violent opposition as a result of the limited avenues available for voicing discontent (Swyngedouw, 2011).

Populism's risk to democracy and its fracturing effect on the public have been key reasons behind the interest and consternation provoked by the recent rise in populist movements.[2] An assessment of the mechanisms through which these movements might be confronted and of the role that cities might play in that process requires a better understanding of the factors driving contemporary populism, factors to which we now turn our attention.

– Economic restructuring

The current levels of inequality, which have largely resulted from the post-Fordist restructuring of the world economy and from the widespread adoption of neoliberal modes of governance (Harvey, 2005), are understood to have helped spur the rise of populism by undermining faith in deliberation and in the democratic mechanisms for political agency. First, the well-publicized and growing influence of money on the electoral landscape has inspired a sense that representation is increasingly available only for a price (Lessig, 2015). Second, the retreat of the managerial state has further diminished people's ability to effect change through voting, substituting in its stead the possibility of exercising choice through spending (Harvey, 1989). Because in a consumer democracy political influence is distributed on the basis of wealth, the immiseration of the poor and middle classes also leads to their disenfranchisement (Monbiot, 2016). Both factors have been compounded by the ascendance across the political spectrum of an elite (i.e. an intellectual and cultural elite among left-wing parties and an economic elite among right-wing ones) that has reinforced feelings of abandonment among the less-educated working class (Piketty, 2018). The ensuing erosion of popular regard for basic democratic principles, rights and institutions politically rewards populist attacks on the free press, the integrity of the voting system, and the credibility of elected office, further degrading their standing and thereby concentrating power in the hands of populist leadership.

It is important to note that the relationship between rising inequality and populism is as much mediated by perceptions as it is grounded in facts. The feelings of dislocation and hardship that have animated both right- and left-wing populism throughout the world do not always correspond primarily with material conditions. A study conducted by Gidron and Hall in twenty developed democracies concludes that the decline in the subjective social status of supporters of right-wing populist leaders arises in part from shifts in 'cultural frameworks that bear on their social identities' (Gidron and Hall, 2017: 63). In the US, voters who feel that whites are falling behind are more likely to support Trump, regardless of their level of economic anxiety. (Ehrenfreund and Clement, 2016). In considering the motivations behind populist

2 General concern about current democratic crises and populist upheavals can be construed as arising from nostalgic views about a democratic golden age that never was—a nostalgia analogous to populism's longing for a mythic past. This nostalgia can risk a problematic elision of historical context. To limit one's concern for the erosion of democratic norms to the last couple of years is to fail to reckon with historic patterns of injustice that ought to be placed in dialogue with, not apart from, contemporary demagoguery. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss nostalgia entirely as a political force. Just as the populist desire for a return of past glories is not always merely an expression of nativism or revanchism, but also of legitimate concerns about deindustrialization, political corruption and social fragmentation (Gaston and Hilhorst, 2018), so can nostalgic retrospection of our democratic past serve contemporary needs and possibilities, and therefore be pressed into service to advance political debate.

movements, we must therefore account not just for economic factors, but also for cultural factors that shape social identities and perceptions of social standing.

– Cultural divides

Scholars have found an explanation for the resurgence of populist parties in cultural shifts triggered by global mobility (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). On the one hand, as in the case of support for Dutch politician Geert Wilders, populist anti-immigrant (particularly anti-Muslim) sentiment results from the perception that immigration by socially conservative groups represents a threat to Western progressive values such as women's and LGBT rights and freedom of speech (Vossen, 2011). On the other, the embrace of global mobility by an increasingly assertive stratum of European society has led to a backlash against the growing acceptance of diversity, multiculturalism and universal human rights (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). The insertion of these values into mainstream policy discussions has not sat well with those 'who were once the privileged majority culture in Western societies, [and who now] resent being told that traditional values are "politically incorrect"' (*ibid*.: 29). As a result, many of them have embraced populist platforms that explicitly reaffirm and defend their traditional outlooks.

Populist mobilizations have increasingly revolved around cultural differences that implicate the public realm. Recent conflicts at the site of Confederate statues in the American South are just the latest flare-up in an ongoing set of 'culture wars' that complicate everything from arts funding to heritage preservation to cultural planning efforts (Vance, 1989; Harvey, 2011). Public art and heritage sites are designed to celebrate collective histories; but as moments like the riot in Charlottesville, VA in August 2017 make plain, the question of what merits celebration emerges with force. Those (on any side) who feel their culture is being misrepresented or erased are ever more ready to voice a claim to public recognition.

The crisis of cultural representation has found expression in the politicization even of mainstream media—whatever 'mainstream' can still be construed to mean in an era of media superabundance. Much of the public opinion on the right and the left is fostered by partisan media generated in an increasingly fractured landscape that extends well beyond traditional urban media clusters such as New York, London and Cairo. This situation is exacerbated by the inconspicuousness of the media's hyper-partisanship and by the absence of opposing viewpoints and meaningful counterpoint in the feeds and networks through which more and more news is consumed. Illustrative of this polarization is a corrective tool called 'Red Feed, Blue Feed', published by the *Wall Street Journal*, that encourages readers of a particular political persuasion to leave their Facebook echo chamber and enter the bizarro world of the opposing political pole.[3]

How people see themselves and their interests represented in the media deeply impacts their relationship vis à vis powerful institutions. Debord (1983: Section 14) reminds us that although 'the spectacle aims at nothing but itself … reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real'. Populist leaders like Trump manufacture images and words to create an impression that they represent their supporters' interests. While many politicians often play upon precisely these dynamics (thereby creating a facsimile of political and cultural representation through media representation), populist figures represent the apotheosis of this tendency.

– The post-truth trap

The factors discussed in the previous two sub-sections—insecurity borne of perceived or real economic disadvantage and the weaponization of cultural anxiety—combine to reinforce a third: a diminution of social trust and belief in a singular, common truth. This diminution, in turn, further undermines our capacity to overcome public division.

3 This tool can be found at: http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/.

The late Senator from New York Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously quipped that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not to their own facts. It is, however, precisely to their own facts—to their own 'alternative facts'—that populists feel entitled. President Trump, for one, explicitly asserted just such a right on the very day of his inauguration. Since then, the Trump administration has exercised that right prolifically and without losing the support of its electoral base.[4] This insouciance toward countervailing evidence reflects a shift in broader cultural attitudes toward truth and authority. It suggests that the cultural differences that drive partisan affiliation have finally untethered matters like racial politics, national identity and questions of law and order from a common evidentiary foundation. As a result, assertions no longer require substantiation to validate one group's fundamental truths or flout another's verities.

Research in political science and psychology questions our capacity to evaluate evidence and revise our views accordingly. One study concludes that susceptibility to misinformation and acceptance of countervailing evidence depends on an individual's political inclination (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2012). In this and other such results, it is belief that often shapes evidence and not the other way around (Hart and Nisbet, 2012). The tendency to 'misapprehend' evidence may partly arise from our predisposition to process political information in areas of the brain responsible for emotion rather than reason (Westen *et al.*, 2006). This explanation corresponds with theories that cast reason as a rationalizing handmaiden to the moral intuitions that actually undergird political positions (Haidt, 2013). Provocatively, a correlation between these intuitions and certain (congenital or acquired) involuntary reflexes— such as the startle reflex or the disgust reflex—suggest that our political compass may align more with visceral impulse than with dispassionate reflection (Smith *et al.*, 2011). Does all this mean that we enter the political arena hardwired to be selectively impervious to reason and partially blind to facts and truths? A quick flip of the channels (or click of the links) may indicate as much; but perhaps it all depends on what you're inclined to believe.

None of this should come as a revelation to academics, in whose postmodern hands Truth has also died many a death. In the process of reframing the notion of truth as a function of power and as a tool of oppression, schools across multiple disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities have, under the banner of equity, cast off the yoke of essentialisms and universalisms and embraced ever more contingent, elusive and plural conceptualizations of the truth (Harvey, 1990). This reframing has upended categories such as race, gender, community and class that previously stood on firmer structural ground (Rodgers, 2011). Within academia, this move remains associated with progressive politics. Beyond academia, however, it has not always redounded to the benefit of the dispossessed. This should come as no surprise, since, in an unsettled epistemic landscape, one should not expect truth claims to reflect any particular notion of justice.

The theoretical traditions that have politicized 'the truth' have avoided the slippery slope of relativism by recasting it as a social accomplishment. This accomplishment requires either a shared epistemic basis—as in Fish's interpretive communities or Dewey's competent democratic public (Dewey, 1954; Fish, 1982)—or the recognition of a shared humanity (Nietzsche, [1888] 2010; Rorty, 1989). It demands, in other words, the egg of epistemology or the chicken of solidarity, each of which can engender a virtuous circle between the two or, in its absence, a vicious one. This brings us back to the governing challenges posed by populists who hold themselves up as the final arbiters of truth. Not coincidentally, the current political context evinces both a fractured public and a crisis of truth and epistemic authority. The longstanding liberal presumption that we can overcome these challenges through more and better communication and understanding may prove, if not correct, then at least better than

4 On 23 June 2017 (updated on 21 July), the *New York Times* offered a compendium of Trump's lies, documenting a 40-day streak of demonstrably false pronouncements—a streak interrupted only by Twitter-less days at Mar-a-Lago.

the available alternatives; but it offers little indication of how we might practically confront our deepening distrust of one another and our increasing unwillingness to assume reciprocal obligations as fellow citizens.

Urban policy in the face of populism

The factors driving the populist resurgence point implicitly to a range of potential strategies for confronting it. Based on the various factors discussed above, possible solutions might include economic development policies, redistributive programs, and measures that counterbalance media fragmentation and identity politics. In a recent commentary, Mudde (2017) complements these possibilities with calls for: a vigorous defense of liberal democracy; an ideological engagement with—rather than the depoliticization of— issues of populist concern; and a rejection of the populist division between 'the people' and 'the others'. And yet, promising though these approaches might seem, their viability depends on a political will and democratic capacity that have been diminished by the very factors that these strategies aim to confront. In what follows, we consider the role of cities as relevant sites for pursuing alternative approaches for addressing social fracture. In this section, we focus on the city as a form of local governance. We explore its ability to address the effects of populism while acknowledging its limitations and the need to consider a more expansive conception of urban politics. In the subsequent section, we discuss the city as a site of politics and consider its importance in forging spaces where the cultivation of solidarity across difference might contribute to the renewal of a more inclusive polity.

A little over 50 years ago, Dahl (1967: 954) argued that 'the appropriate unit for democracy is the city-state'. In his view, cities are large and populous enough to mobilize resources necessary for major policy interventions but small enough to allow meaningful participation by their residents. This perspective still resonates with contemporary urban leaders. In the words of former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, 'we're the level of government closest to the majority of the world's people. We're directly responsible for their well-being and their futures. So while nations talk, but too often drag their heels–cities act'.[5] Additionally, the concentration of economic and political power in cities allows them to act independently of national governments and to figure as central actors in policymaking and foreign affairs. Municipalities have as of late lent credence to these arguments by altering policymaking scales to tackle areas where upper levels of government have long held stronger sway (Barber, 2013). They have led the way, for instance, in reducing carbon emissions, raising the minimum wage, addressing housing affordability, and promoting gender and racial equality. The economic and political power harnessed by cities to pursue the above policy goals could also be leveraged to address the effects of populism. We find a recent and striking example of this in the 'sanctuary city' designations, which have insulated undocumented residents from the enforcement of US federal immigration policy and which, in so doing, have openly undermined a key populist platform of the Trump administration. Despite ensuing threats of federal funding cuts, cities have held their ground, corroborating the view that cities' resources afford them significant latitude in challenging populist movements even when these enjoy support at higher levels of government.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, city-led opposition comes with risks. Traditional bastions of state power have ample capacity to counteract municipal policy. First, the formal division among levels of government often constrains cities' political influence by rendering their policy decisions subject to preemption. That is certainly the case under the federalist system of the United States (Schragger, 2016). But cities in other contexts also suffer from similar structural disadvantages. In Canada, for instance, municipalities are creatures of the province and lack the fiscal, administrative and political capacity

5 Remarks delivered at the Economic Cooperation and Development Conference organized by the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group in Chicago, March 2012.

to adopt autonomous agendas. This vulnerability was recently put on display by a legal dispute between the City of Toronto and Ontario Premier Doug Ford, who ultimately prevailed and managed to reduce the number of electoral wards in Toronto's municipal council from 47 to 25 (Mahoney, 2019).

Second, local governments confronted with a need for greater financial independence from their federal counterparts might increase their reliance on private investments, such as social impact bonds, a strategy that implicates speculative financial markets in social service provision in order to incentivize behavior that might result in mutually agreed-upon outcomes. Interventions like this further consolidate the model of neoliberal urbanism associated with revanchist policies and could consequently aggravate the conditions that sparked the recent rise of populism in the first place. Given the structural constraints on municipalities, the potential of cities to serve as bulwarks against populism may therefore lie in part beyond the formal channels of local government. It might depend instead on cities' relative advantage as fields of political action and as spaces of encounter and deliberation.

Bridging the divide: repositioning the urban as the space of politics

Populist fracture cannot be countered through empirical proof, unilateral appeals to higher moral principles, or the quarantining of invidious or inconvenient opinions—all common critical strategies. As an alternative, a more productive engagement with populism might begin with the recognition that the epistemological assumptions, evidentiary standards and institutional contexts that attend normative commitments to democracy are of no higher order than those associated with populist publics. The resulting even footing would produce a more conducive platform for examining how populist-orienting principles might productively coexist alongside others in a democratic arena. This does not entail accepting a relativistic equivalence among policy positions. It does, however, entail a willingness to subject the basis of all political propositions to equal collective consideration and to create and nurture spaces where that might happen so that a more inclusive polity might thereby be renewed.

Conventional ontologies locate politics within state institutions. In the Anglo-American tradition, urban politics is typically studied with a focus on governmental jurisdictions, either with a municipalist or a regionalist bias (Magnusson, 2014; Boudreau, 2017). Such an approach is useful in demarcating a scale of action for formal political actors, strategies, policies and institutions. Territorial boundaries, however, fit less easily with many informal, spontaneous or radical forms of political practice that enable groups of people to organize themselves around specific issues and to self-identify as collective political actors (Cochrane, 2018).

Magnusson (2011; 2014) and Davidson and Iveson (2018) conceptualize 'the urban' as an intrinsic space of politics where publics come into being. Indeed, democracy, citizenship and cities have a historic association with each other in Western imaginaries; and until recently, cities were a condition of possibility for the emergence of democracy (Isin, 2000). Proponents of planetary urbanization go further and argue that, currently, worldwide urbanization has generated a global condition of urban life that blurs typologies of city/suburbs/rurality and consolidates broader processes of political economy, urban form and socio-environmental linkages, with implications that are vastly uneven but totalizing in their reach (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). From this perspective, the urban is a social process and a political arena that far exceeds the city (and its suburbs) as a jurisdiction (Keil, 2018).

Globalization and the emergence of a worldwide urban society enable new logics of governance and political action to develop (Boudreau, 2017). Under an urban logic of political action, the process of resisting or transforming power relations and ways of governing are increasingly informal: they involve spontaneous, affective and intuitive agency. At a broader scale, these logics operate not through hierarchical organizational

structures, but as networked movements of people able to articulate everyday political practices through visible events (Boudreau, 2019). Political action in the city often unfolds through encounters, which are construed as a radical urban category with democratizing potential and the capacity to form collectivities based on common notions and affinities (Merrifield, 2012; 2013). For instance, the Occupy Wall Street movement that took place in 2011 started without a discernible leader or organization; but as protesters occupied public spaces and encountered each other, they captured the collective imagination and turned a small occupation into a global networked movement (Merrifield, 2013).

Critical urban theory thus conceptualizes the urban as an immanent site for 'nurturing political subjectivation, mediating political encounter, staging interruption, and experimentally producing new forms of democratization that prefigure radical imaginaries of what urban democratic being-in-common might be all about' (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017: 3). This ontological grounding allows the repositioning of the city as a platform for challenging populism through a re-examination of our modes of public engagement and governance and through the emergence of solidarities.

– Situated solidarities

The renewal of a meaningfully democratic polity depends on the cultivation of solidarity across difference. This approach represents a retreat from the Habermasian utopian speech state that served as a guiding ideal for the communicative planning model. Instead, it adopts a hopeful ontology grounded in John Dewey's creative democracy, a 'moral practice of openness to others in the collective project of hammering out answers to the question of how we should live' (Lake, 2017: 480). In this regard, Dewey embraces difference as a precondition to democracy, rather than casting it as an obstacle to it; and in this he is hardly alone. The vision of democracy as an agonistic struggle finds voice in the work of theorists from Aristotle to Rancière, Spinoza to Lefebvre (Purcell, 2013b; 2017). From this perspective, the presence of difference, far from undermining the possibility of solidarity, actually constitutes an essential element in the common, cooperative project of democracy. We find in the work of Iris Marion Young (2000) a useful model for rebuilding trust even in agonistic settings.

Difference for proponents of agonistic democracy is multifaceted; demographic and political differences are spatially mediated. This explains why remedies to public fracture are most easily envisioned at scales defined by physical proximity—scales at which interaction most viscerally exceeds essentializing narratives that might otherwise define those encounters. Proximity plays a fundamental role in Young's model. Young posits *greeting, rhetoric and narrative* as mutually reinforcing strategies for enabling meaningful deliberation. First, greeting establishes the basis for shared humanity and acknowledgement of the other. Then, an embrace of affect, body language and other forms of 'situated style' allow for deliberation to unfold in the participants' authentic voice (Young, 2000: 64). Finally, the sharing of narratives grounded in everyday lived experience renders participants' perspectives legible to those with whom they might otherwise disagree.

We do not propose Young's or any other methodology as an ideal speech setting where conflict melts away in dispassionate, frictionless palaver. We, like Young, envision a discursive enactment of realpolitik, with all the fits and starts that that entails. Furthermore, we see examples of it working in our current fractious moment. One instance in the US is the work of Put People First Pennsylvania, which seeks to overcome spatial and political fragmentation by bringing ordinary citizens from rural and urban counties together to share stories and frustrations.[6] The goal of the organization is to cultivate shared subjectivity through story and facilitated dialogue,

6 For more information see: https://www.putpeoplefirstpa.org/who-we-are/.

so as to influence electoral outcomes in this 'battleground' political jurisdiction. We are also struck by the courage of the pro-Trump rally organizers who made room in their September 2017 event in Washington DC to allow Black Lives Matter activists to bring their message successfully to the audience, opening even the barest crack in that seemingly impenetrable facade of racial and class resentment (Soong, 2017). Even within academia, first-hand encounters can counterbalance the institutional remove, narrow ideological bandwidth and proclivity for remote abstraction that can often hinder interaction with those operating in different contexts. We note the example of planning scholar Karen Trapenberg Frick, who despite student objections, invites Tea Party activists into her classroom and thereby facilitates more cordial and productive political discussions than would otherwise be likely.[7]

Realizing the deliberative potential of situated encounters requires an infrastructure upon which conviviality and solidarity may flourish. This approach would start with the recognition of the types of diversity that characterize urban life and with the promotion, on that basis, of environments oriented toward mitigating inequality and discrimination (Fincher and Iveson, 2008). It would also entail not just ensuring access to public resources, but also creating spaces of social encounter that facilitate empathy and intersubjective understanding, and that offer people opportunities to explore hybrid aspects of themselves through their relationships to others.

The Social Urbanism program adopted by the city of Medellín in Colombia in 2004 offers an apt example of urban planning based on principles of a *just* diversity. This initiative aimed to remedy socio-spatial inequality and to rebuild the social fabric of a city long rent by decades of violent conflict, distrust and marginalization of the urban poor. It involved improvements to the infrastructure and social services of low-income, peripheral neighborhoods. The inclusion of these areas into the rapidly expanding transit network has been credited with promoting local economic development, a better quality of life and better service provision, thus helping to counter the stigma associated with neighborhoods where justice, security and living standards have been historically precarious (Brand and Dávila, 2011). The program also entailed the creation of public hybrid spaces where diverse people might meet. Medellín's Network of Public Library-Parks, for instance, has included even in poor neighborhoods multipurpose libraries that offer spaces, opportunities and activities for all age groups. These attractions succeed not just in serving local residents, but also in attracting outsiders and inviting all visitors to explore old and new interests as well as different ways of living and thinking (Sotomayor and Daniere, 2018).

– Multi-scalar solidarities

Heartening though the above examples might be, they all share to varying degrees the empathetic advantages of embodied encounters. This raises the question of how we might scale these productive modes of engagement up to networks of activism and forms of remote political interaction so as to compound our deliberative capacity. We recognize and even emphasize the co-constitution of scales and the extent to which a transformed praxis requires a politics of place that operates mindful of the interrelation between the local and extra-local (Massey, [1991] 1994: 7). Such a politics of place would aim to lay bare the inter-scalar power relations that divide the public and to thereby equip people to better realize the possibility of changing and being changed by the city. All that said, we don't need either to romanticize town hall democracy or to equate remoteness with dialogic atrophy to recognize the distorting effects of prevailing technological platforms for communication. Consuming and circulating news items selected algorithmically based on reading histories by a company in the business of selling habitudinal metrics for advertising dollars is probably not a good way to grapple with or even encounter

7 Personal communication, 13 October 2017.

alternative viewpoints. A broadcasting system that limits transmissions to 280 characters, accommodates anonymity, and promotes a correspondence between popularity and worth is a system that probably encourages histrionics and provocation (from humans and bots) over temperate, well-considered nuance.

And yet, there have been examples that demonstrate how even the technological biases of predominant social media might be overcome. The West Virginia teachers strike of winter 2018, which closed schools in all the state's 55 counties after a staged walkout by teachers and sympathetic superintendents and school support personnel, combined the best of virtual and embodied organizing, demonstrating solidarity across space. Teachers used social media to surmount the technology's tendencies, broke through the 'Red Feed, Blue Feed' bubble, and found a common cause to bridge the distance between rural coal country and areas considered bedroom communities for Washington DC. In so doing, what began with a few angry teachers grew quickly and engaged more than 24,000 workers (Kunkel, 2018). This example demonstrates social media's potential to spark a new gathering logic—a 'logic of agglomeration' (Juris, 2012)—in urban public spaces. As illustrated by the #Occupy Everywhere and, more recently, the #MeToo and #MarchforOurLives movements in the US, as well as by the *Indignados* in Spain and Greece, social media have increasingly facilitated the assembly of activists from diverse backgrounds in physical urban space (Anduiza *et al*., 2014).

Social activists have also shown a capacity to establish transnational networks in order to exert political pressure on national and even global actors. For instance, as part of its campaign against predatory equity in East Harlem, New York, the neighborhood-based Movement for Justice in el Barrio has forged ties to similarly oriented activist groups from across the world through physical and virtual annual 'encounters'. The resulting allegiances have allowed it to challenge international landlords at their scale of operation (Fields, 2014). Along similar lines, transnational 'right to the city' movements offer a promising means for claims grounded on the diverse everyday struggles and experiences of urban residents to achieve better access to food, shelter and decision-making on issues that directly affect their lives (Mayer, 2012; Purcell, 2013a; 2014).

Such possibilities of success, however, should not blind us to the risks associated with relying on convening technologies that have proven to be easily co-optable, powerful platforms for fostering division and insularity. The inherent limitations of existing convening tools may in fact compel the formulation of new ones better suited for rescaling everyday practices of disruption, political experimentation and deliberation.

– Populism as a point of departure

In this essay, we have taken stock of a number of forces that have driven the current upsurge in populist movements. We have also considered ways in which these dynamics undermine our capacity to counter the populist challenge to democratic institutions and processes through those very institutions and processes. Rather than reiterate calls for greater and more inclusive democratic deliberation and ignore the obstacles that increasingly stand in its way, we have examined strategies for nurturing solidarities across difference so as to reinvigorate spaces where such deliberation might once more be possible or even reimagined. In doing so, we have focused on cities as sites of political encounter and experimentation that are especially well-suited to this purpose, and we have advanced examples of two sets of strategies that have shown promise in fomenting a more inclusive polity.

The emphasis on the potentialities of political encounter without a preconception as to their spatial articulation provides a necessary complement to scholarship that seeks to sort out the changing regional dynamics and spatial configurations of right-wing populism (see for example the IJURR September 2019 issue). We find such debates, while necessary, insufficient. For one, they often ignore the volatility of political opinion and

the blurring of boundaries by political alliances whenever these diverge from prevailing spatial narratives (Kipfer and Saberi, 2016). More importantly, these explanations can reify spatial categories (e.g. urban versus rural) and downplay the extent to which these themselves are social effects shaped by transnational forces, as demonstrated by the coincidence of populist movements in multiple corners of the world.

If the current success of populist movements has depended in no small measure on various forms of public fracture, then recognizing and addressing those divisions constitutes a crucial step in developing strategies to counter them. We echo Kipfer and Dikeç's (2019: 12) view of politics as a dynamic process that cannot be reduced to one-off acts like voting. By treating politics instead as a struggle over people's place and positionality, we can conceive of the future as open to efforts by urban actors to help shape a more inclusive democratic public and therefore reinvigorate democratic institutions and processes. Central to the strategies discussed here is the recognition that people's values and perceptions might be less polarized than they appear in popular debate. Empirical findings from a recent report (Hawkins *et al*., 2018) show that most Americans have more complex views on contested issues and are more willing to compromise than the us vs. them rhetoric would suggest. Solidarity-oriented efforts would offer a way to build upon what brings people together rather than emphasize what pulls them apart.

There will always be feelings of vulnerability and forms of social difference that those seeking political gain might exploit in order to foment social cleavage, inter-group resentment, and distrust in political institutions that do not appear to observe those divisions. We have provided examples of practices that enable or reinforce a sense of solidarity and that, in so doing, sideline social differences or at least provide grounds for addressing them. These range from the provision of infrastructure that enables convivial embodied interaction to rescaled activist campaigns that overcome physical distance and the biases of technologically mediated exchange by finding a common cause and mobilizing around it. We offer these less as templates to follow than as evidence that the promotion of situated and multi-scalar solidarities via old and new gathering logics may offer untapped opportunities for sociability and political experimentation, as well as productive outlets for negotiating conflict and frustration in the immediate sphere of everyday life. The success of these efforts and the applicability of these strategies across different contexts and scales remain highly contingent, rendering the nature of those contingencies a fruitful avenue for future research.

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