Introduction: Cities, Justice and Conflict
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What is This?
Introduction: Cities, Justice and Conflict

Paul Routledge

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Urban Conflicts and the Right to the City

This Special Issue of Urban Studies is concerned with cities as spaces of contestation in a time of rapid urbanisation and—despite the global financial crisis—ongoing (neo-liberal) capitalist development. The rapid growth and changing character of urban space have important implications for democratic rights and justice claims both within and beyond the city. Moreover, such rights and claims must negotiate urban terrains differentially impacted by neo-liberal capitalist globalisation and its effects upon the development and planning of cities. Neoliberalism is, of course, neither monolithic nor omnipresent, taking hybrid or composite forms around the world (Larner, 2000), with diverse (and place-specific) effects, negotiations, outcomes, transformations and resistances.

As Yong-Sook Lee and Brenda Yeoh argue in a recent Special Issue of Urban Studies

Places are actively forged as products of the politics of inclusion and exclusion and by power struggles played out among global, national and local actors in globalisation processes (Lee and Yeoh, 2004, p. 2296).

This, they argue, gives rise to what they term ‘forgotten places’ within cities which themselves are the product of a politics of forgetting that ranges from being unincorporated in capitalist urban development to being marginalised or, indeed, discarded, by global capital and other actors operating within the discourse of neo-liberalism. The politics of forgetting refers to a political-discursive process in which cadres of professionals in larger cities are employed to render places and the sense of place forgettable (Markusen, 2004); specific marginalised social groups are rendered invisible within dominant national political cultures (Fernandes, 2004); and vulnerable groups have frequently been displaced as demand for land has risen and as emergent moral and aesthetic evaluations about suitably ‘national’ or ‘global’ land use have rendered them ‘out of place’ (Bunnell and Nah, 2004; see also Bunnell et al., this issue). A shelter crisis has become inherent to globalising cities in developing countries, as a contradiction emerges between the extensive redevelopment and rising property values that accompany ‘global city’ development and the shelter needs of low-income people (Shatkin, 2004). Indeed, life for the majority of the world’s urban dwellers is increasingly characterised by poor housing, lack of infrastructure, physical displacement increasing...
inequality, homelessness, unemployment and underemployment (Davis, 2006; see also Heynen, this issue).

Moreover, urban governing institutions have been restructured so as to respond more to the needs of securing capital investment than to being a democratic forum for the interests of urban citizens (Falk, 2000; Goodhart, 2001). Decision-making power that shapes urban space has increasingly shifted away from urban citizens towards the corporate sector (Peck, 1998; Ward, 2000) and the restructuring of the parameters of political democracy has led to the undermining of urban democracy while creating certain opportunities for élite urban actors (Swyngedouw, 2005; Garcia, 2006; Taylor, 2007).

As other recent research in Urban Studies attests, living in the contemporary city also involves a range of other inequities associated with increasing numbers of gated communities (Pow, 2007); racism (Forrest and Dunn, 2007); social and economic exclusions and segregations (Peelman, 2002; Murie and Musterd, 2004; Yeoh, 2004; Musterd, 2006; Laan Bouma-Doff, 2007); and terrorism (Special Issue of International Journal of Urban and Regional Research on Cities, 11 September and the ‘war on terrorism’ 2002; Lyon, 2003; Molotch and McClain, 2003; Savitch, 2005; Graham, 2006; Smith, 2006). Such processes, born from different and contested interests, have frequently led to increased conflict within urban space, as communities challenge urban restructuring and their associated marginalisation and deprivation (Fernandes, 2004; Markusen, 2004; Newman and Wyly, 2006; Skuse and Cousins, 2007). As Lily Kong and Lisa Law (2002, p. 1506) argued in their introduction to the Special Issue of Urban Studies on ‘Contested Landscapes, Asian Cities’, the everyday life of the urban is both “enframed, constrained and colonised by the disciplinary technologies of power”, but it is also a primary site of resistance to such dominating power. This finds many forms in the city—for example, in the city’s material structure of people’s dwellings (Bunnell and Nah, 2004; Shatkin, 2004); religious monuments (Philp and Mercer, 2002); and streets (for example, see Heynen; Bunnell et al.; Leontidou; and Routledge; in this issue).

As Angotti (2006) argues, there are many progressive and radical urban movements around the world involved in resisting the assaults on their lifeworlds—for example, challenging evictions, working for better living conditions including struggles between landlords and tenants. Examples include City Life/Vida Urbana in Boston, US, organising eviction blockades against the sub-prime evictions; militant community organisations in Latin American cities in Mexico (Oaxaca) and Venezuela (Caracas) demanding increased autonomy in community affairs; citizens participating in city budget processes (for example, Porto Alegre, Brazil); squatters’ movements (Prujt, 2003; Uitermark, 2004a; Leontidou, this issue); and a range of attempts at citizen participation in urban democracy (for example, Beaumont and Loopmans, 2008; Lipietz, 2008; Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008).

Urban conflicts act to politicise the contradictions of capitalist restructuring, to challenge the discursive and institutional terrains of urban politics. Indeed, urban protests (for example, in Seattle, Prague and Genoa) have also been involved in more global challenges to neo-liberalism associated with the alter-globalisation mobilisations (for example, Pendras, 2002; Köhler and Wissen, 2003; Routledge, 2003; Uitermark, 2004b; Leontidou, this issue). Moreover, the World Social Forum and regional social forums have been made possible by myriad globalised local movements from cities (and their connection to rural movements) in collaboration with well designed urban public institutions (Baiocchi, 2005; Leontidou, this issue).
Within these contexts, the politics of public space has assumed a central role, as material public spaces have become a primary venue for the shaping of dissent (Mitchell and Staeheli, 2005). Many of these struggles are concerned with democracy and citizenship in the city, and there has been a plethora of research on such issues (for example, Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Secor, 2003) and on ‘the right to the city’ (Friedmann, 1995; Dikec, 2001; Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2003, 2006; Staeheli, 2003). Indeed, it has been argued that the ‘right to the city’ is at the heart of any vision of democracy, such rights being the means of organising and contesting power relations and the social content of justice. This struggle for rights produces space, and political action—in the form of actively claiming urban space—acts as the fulcrum upon which the right to the city is leveraged (Mitchell, 2003).

Purcell (2006, pp. 1930–1931) argues for a conception of the right to the city as articulated by Henri Lefebvre (1968, 1991), whereby there is a radical restructuring of social, political and economic relations, within the city and beyond, to enable people (particularly urban inhabitants) to be enfranchised with respect to all decisions that produce urban space. Further, the city must be produced to meet the needs of the users of urban space rather than its owners. Thus conflicts within cities can be best understood as struggles that articulate rights to inhabit space (rather than owning it) without preference given to scale, or to the urban over the rural (Purcell, 2006). Hence, the right to the city necessitates a right to urban and political space, whereby the urban citizen participates in urban social life and maintains an active participation in the political life of the city. Urban citizenship refers to a form of identification with the city, the construction of which through political struggle is enabled by the right to difference and collective resistance (for example, new ways of life, new social relations and the possibilities to differ) (Dikec, 2001). Clearly, the conception of such rights varies dramatically depending on the society in question.

However, as Mark Purcell (2006) persuasively argues, there is a danger that, without sufficient theorisation, such ‘rights’ privilege the interests of local (urban) residents over wider publics (but see Leontidou; Panelli and Larner, this issue).1 This is important because, stressing the distinctiveness and internal cohesiveness of place-based (urban) worlds can reinforce essentialised differences between people and the exclusive characteristics of belonging, where actors in specific places can be seen as bearing homogeneous interests and identities which set them apart from actors in other locales, placing ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ into perpetual struggles over the realisation of conflicting interests. Rather, places are internally multiple with pluralistic exchanges between actors within these areas, and the possibility for relational interactions across different sites (Massey, 2004). Moreover, places are not only areas that are internally plural, but they are also linked up to a series of extensive economic, political and cultural networks with varying geographical reach. Notions of internal spatial coherency and boundedness reify rather than reveal the logic of socio-spatial relations in a globalising world. As Ash Amin argues

In this emerging new order, spatial configuration and spatial boundaries are no longer purposively territorial or scalar, since the social, economic and political inside and outside are constituted through the topologies of actor networks which are becoming increasingly dynamic and varied in spatial constitution (Amin, 2004, p. 33).

Recent relational understandings of (urban) space imply that

each local struggle is already a relational achievement, drawing from both within and beyond ‘the local’ (Massey, 2005, p. 182).
David Harvey argues that

It is only when relationality connects to the absolute spaces and times of material and social life that politics comes alive. To neglect that connectivity is to court political irrelevance (Harvey, 2006, p. 293).

This involves understanding the way cities (and their residents) are enmeshed in wider spatial relations and assessing how the ‘global’ is invoked in urban struggles that take place ‘locally’ (see Leontidou, this issue). This can happen through a variety of ways, such as the diffusion of discourses over rights (for example, concerning democracy) or tactics (concerning the prosecution of conflict), from one place to another. It also necessitates the articulation of mutually constitutive relations between the urban and the rural (Missingham, 2002; Pow, 2007; see D’Arcus; Glassman; Panelli and Larner; and Routledge, this issue).

**Urban Space, Rights and Justice**

Rights to urban and political space include, at the most prosaic of levels, rights to shelter, health care, education, difference and economic and food security. It is the right to have a voice in how the city is shaped, concerning development, taxes, transport, housing and the environment. Struggles over resources, public spaces, schools and parks are also struggles over process (such as those concerning democracy and decision-making), to retain the structural character, social and environmental composition and socio-economic cohesion of specific urban communities. Hence, struggles over the right to inhabit space involve the articulation of demands for social, economic and environmental justice (on sustainable cities, see Whitehead, 2003; Schweitzer and Stephenson, 2007).

David Harvey (1996, 2003) argues that ideals of justice are indispensible for motivation and action, but they require contextualisation. They must be critically evaluated in terms of the situatedness or positionality of the argument and the arguer. Harvey goes on to argue that derivative rights (for example, the right to be treated with dignity, to secure employment, to organise in the workplace, to living standards) should become fundamental and fundamental rights (for example, of private property and the profit rate) should become derivative. He calls for

an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, and to re-make ourselves in a different image (Harvey, 2003, p. 941).

What is at stake here is the right to the production of space (Harvey, 2000).

As Dikec (2001) argues, the production of space manifests various forms of injustice but also produces and reproduces them. Injustice, Dikec argues, is produced socially and spatially as well, in two ways: the spatiality of injustice, which includes material spaces as well as social and economic relationships that sustain the production of injustice (for example, segregated neighbourhoods); and, the injustice of spatiality—i.e. the elimination of possibilities for the formation of popular political responses (for example, how structures (re)produce injustice through space—property markets; housing policies, etc.) (Dikec, 2001, pp. 1792–1793; see also Merrifield and Swyngedouw, 1997).

Those vested with the power to produce the physical spaces we inhabit through development, investment, planning (and their antitheses)—as well as through grassroots embodied activisms are likewise vested with the power to perpetuate injustices and/or create just spaces. Justice is a shared responsibility of engaged actors in the socio-spatial systems they inhabit and (re)produce (Bromberg et al., 2007). As Don Mitchell argues

Social struggle remains crucial to the actual structuring and shaping of social justice ... Public space must be understood as a gauge of
the *regimes* of justice extant at any particular moment. Public space *is*, in this sense, the space of justice. It is not only the space where the right to the city is struggled over; it is where it is implemented and represented (Mitchell, 2003, p. 235).

However, as Smith (1997) has argued, it is hard to define ‘urban justice’ since most definitions express certain hopes and aspirations rather than diagnosing particular structural (capitalist) conditions and solutions. Indeed, although precise conceptions of justice will differ between urban political actors in different cultural and political-economic circumstances, they are usually concerned with the fairness of the social order and its attendant distributions of awards and costs (although see Glassman, this issue for a counter-example). However, the different criteria used to define it will yield different principles of justice (for example, see Kobayashi and Ray, 2000; Smith, 2000). Hence, Nancy Fraser (1997) and Iris Marion Young (1990) argue that conflicts should be understood within the imbrication of culture and political economy, thus political projects need to demand both equities of distribution (for example, of resources according to human need); and of recognition (i.e. difference, such as gender, ethnicity, age, class) (see also Harvey, 1973, 1996). However, issues of political participation (Young, 1990; Schlosberg, 2004), require balancing with those of autonomy (for example, see Chatterton, this issue; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006); while notions of appropriative justice (i.e. workers’ rights to production, but also rights to resources/material needs and their conservation) (Burczak, 2006; Leontidou, this issue) must also take into account rights to survival (Heynen, 2006, and this issue). These different notions of justice require knowledge of the processes of inequality and injustice in the world and activists’ personal involvement in attempting to transform them, and incorporate all scales of transformative action—from the personal, the community, the state, to international arenas and institutions.

**Introducing the Special Issue**

The papers in this Special Issue are concerned with urban conflict in some of its forms and highlight how cities provide key mobilising structures and resources for activists. Many of the papers are concerned with struggles over various rights and social justice (for example, Bunnell *et al*.; Chatterton; D’Arcus; Heynen; Leontidou; Routledge); and several highlight the interpellation of urban and rural processes (D’Arcus; Glassman; Panelli and Larner; Routledge). In particular, the papers are concerned with the interpellation of the temporal with the spatial within struggles over women’s rights (Panelli and Larner); alternative ‘claimed’ urban spaces in the UK (Chatterton) and Europe (Leontidou); the role of mediatised representations in urban struggles (Uitermark and Gielen; and, in part, Bunnell *et al*., and Glassman); the (capital) city as a site of national democratic struggle (Glassman; Routledge; Bunnell *et al*.); ethnic marginalisation and discrimination (Bunnell *et al*.; D’Arcus; Uitermark and Gielen); and struggles concerning food security (Heynen).

As Mustafa Dikec (2001) argues, struggles for justice claims and for rights to the city require that people act spatially in four inter-related ways to secure such rights and claims. First, people must act from space, politically mobilising from the material conditions of their space and seek alternative spatialisations. The papers by Leontidou, Chatterton and Heynen particularly address this aspect of spatial struggle. Thus, in considering the transformations in grassroots urban social movements in southern European cities over the past 50 years, Lila Leontidou argues that there have been dematerialising and widening of the ‘right to the city’ from demands for the right to inhabit urban space (for example, via squatting) to demands for the right to gather,
perform and use public space (for example, through social centres and protests). She argues that this reflects changes in the social class basis of southern urban social movements, from working-class communities and internal migrants in the informal sector, to young unemployed, international migrants at the lower levels of poverty, on the one hand, and new cosmopolitan actors on the other, including broad—or even global—loose social networks of what she terms ‘flâneur’ activists: mobile activists utilising digital communication, whose diasporic identities reproduce cosmopolitanism in social movements.

Paul Chatterton’s paper also considers autonomous urban social centres, but in the UK, and shows how the everyday lives, values and practices of participants within them give shape and meaning to the idea of anti-capitalism. Urban space acts as a key organising tool for activists, Chatterton argues, as they rebuild social relationships around emotional responses, solidarity and trust and shared practices of working and learning together. He also shows how activists utilise a range of tools for practising direct democracy, such as consensus decision-making, direct participation and the rejection of hierarchical organisations. Chatterton argues that local (urban) spaces are crucial in constituting anti-capitalist practices, as they forge pragmatic connections with other political projects rather than seeking mobile networked forms of political action.

Nik Heynen considers the urban movement Food Not Bombs (FNB) in the US in order to consider the kinds of resistance necessary to secure the most fundamentally inherent right to the city, the right to eat and survive. Heynen argues that the restructuring of urban public space in the US—through both law and urban design—has intended to eliminate ‘quality-of-life’ violations, such as the sharing of free food. However, Heynen argues that these practices constitute acts of survival for the urban poor and as such are integral to questions of urban justice. He shows how FNB—through a politics of visibility in urban spaces such as parks and streets—seeks to reconfigure both the political economy, and the geography, of survival, by which he means the socio-natural conditions and structures that make human survival possible and how these are related to the socio-spatial processes that impede people from accessing crucial resources such as adequate food necessary for their continued existence.

Dikec’s (2001) second point is that people must also act on space—to appropriate or dominate it with a group identity. This is addressed in the paper by Bruce D’Arcus (as well as the papers by Heynen, Leontidou and Bunnell et al, discussed later). D’Arcus considers the American Indian Movement (AIM) in San Francisco and Minneapolis during the 1960s and early 1970s, in order to show how the city acted as a crucial site for the production of resistance identities and practices. D’Arcus argues that cities provided dynamic settings for the structured inequalities that gave rise to discourses of resistance and also provided the contexts for the development of alternative ideas and strategies, and stages for the dramatisation of dissent. This is because urban space provided a unique mix of discursive, material and practical resources (such as providing contexts for resistance groups to meet diverse ‘others’). The politics of AIM reflected the importance of space to the politics of everyday life—they interpreted the urban environment as alienating and therefore sought to remake particular urban spaces such as the street and the school in more humane ways. D’Arcus also shows how American Indian activism—while often dramatised in rural reservation locations—was in fact constituted in the urban milieu.

Dikec’s third point is that people must act in space, such as taking to the streets for protests, exemplified in the papers by Tim Bunnell, S. Nagrajan and Andrew Willford; Paul Routledge; and Jim Glassman (as well...
as the paper by Heynen); and, finally, people must make space, creating conditions to expand public political involvement (for example, as shown by the papers of Bunnell et al; Routledge; and Leontidou).

Tim Bunnell, S. Nagrajan and Andrew Willford trace senses of injustice among Indian Malaysians which found expression in a major demonstration in Kuala Lumpur in 2007. Focusing upon the displacement and ethnicised marginalisation of Tamil plantation workers caused by the construction of Malaysia’s federal government administrative centre, Putrajaya, the authors show how protestors were demonstrating for their rights as an ethnic minority in post-colonial Malaysia, having faced a range of economic, political and cultural ethnic discrimination, and violence. The authors also show how largely localised experiences of injustice were translated into rights and social justice claims that were expressed in a key urban location and had important national-scale (legal and political) dimensions in Malaysia. The authors conclude that, not only were solidarities forged across ethnic divides by a shared sense of injustice, but that the violence of the law in Malaysia provoked an awareness amongst marginalised ethnicities that justice was not to be found in the law, but rather, in its transgression.

In contrast, the paper by Paul Routledge analyses the prosecution of urban protest by the Democracy Movement within Kathmandu, Nepal, during 2006 and the subsequent peace process of 2006–07. He shows how the Democracy Movement’s demands involved various understandings of democracy involving elements of liberal and radical democracy and the ‘politics of the governed’. Routledge argues that, because of the presence of mobilising structures and resources, urban spaces constitute key arenas in which to bring together the diverse groups that comprise social movements’ participants, providing key, accessible sites for broader mobilisations. However, he notes that, while the physical occupation of urban space comprised an integral part of the challenge for democratic rights, questions remain concerning whether the Nepal’s urban-based civil society will provide the political space from which to address the inequalities that face the country’s predominantly rural population.

This issue is taken up from a different perspective by Jim Glassman, who considers the Thai military coup of September 2006—which ousted a democratically elected government—and the political coup attempt of 2008. Glassman argues that Thai politics is characterised by Bangkok/up-country and urban/rural binaries that are socially and politically produced as integral components of the process of uneven development. Moreover, he points out that most political developments in Thailand have centred on Bangkok not only because it is the centre of political and economic power, but because as the centre of media production, the establishment of favourable relations with Bangkok-based media outlets is crucial to effective political mobilisation and alliance building throughout the country. The coup, he argues, while executed by the military, on behalf of royalist interests, was supported by an array of primarily Bangkok-based and middle-class groups, many of them associated with organisations such as NGOs and state enterprise unions, whose street and media presence was crucial in giving a degree of popular (and global) legitimacy to the 2006 coup. The outcome of such urban mobilisations has paved the way for what Glassman terms “post-democracy” in Thailand, a situation in which governments elected by the majority cannot effectively function or carry out policies because of Bangkok-based and royalist opposition.

The final two papers in this Special Issue deal with conflictual urban collaborations between government and civil society organisations. Concerned, like Glassman, with the
effects of the media, Justus Uitermark and Amy-Jane Gielen discuss the mediatisation of the relationships between the Dutch government and Muslim civil society associations in an Amsterdam neighbourhood. Focusing upon a particular episode—the ‘Contract with Society’ that was intended to formalise and symbolise the joint action of the neighbourhood government and three mosques to fight against Islamic radicalism—the authors show how a discursive struggle developed between the different parties as each tried to articulate, communicate and institutionalise their particular definition of the situation. The authors argue that media representations do not just reflect local realities, but also transform the logic of governance and, in their case study, altered the balance of power between government agencies and civil society associations. Rather than address actual concerns within the neighbourhood in question, the government acted against Islamic radicalism not because it observed it in the neighbourhood, but because it sensed that there was a demand among national media audiences for images and narratives of such a struggle.

The final paper, by Ruth Panelli and Wendy Larner, considers two specific forms of (urban) activism—an Australian women’s ‘Heritage Project’ and a New Zealand ‘Fishbowl’ evaluation of a community development programme—in order to show how politics is contingent on diverse temporal as well as spatial conditions. They argue that each initiative involved the creation of a participatory space between state and grassroots community actors in order to advance grassroots political claims, albeit at the risk of reconstituting activism as ‘social capital’. The authors also highlight how urban sites and resources can be mobilised by activists and brokers in order to participate in wider political and social agendas, thus enabling more-than-local rights to the city for those who wish to leverage the processes of governance that are regularly grounded in urban locations and institutions. Hence, they conclude, urban activism may be conceptualised to embrace wider learning networks and opportunities originating both within and beyond particular urban sites.

Spatial Justice and Solidarity

Struggles for spatial justice and rights to the city require sustained collective action and solidarity: people must act from, act on and act in space, in order to remake it. They must politically mobilise from their material spatial conditions in order to appropriate, dominate and reshape space to create the conditions to expand public political involvement (Dikec, 2001). This is not to overprivilege the importance of the urban in contrast to other scales, or non-urban places, rather it is to recognise its contemporary strategic importance at a time when (neo-liberal) capitalism has been pursued particularly vehemently in cities (Purcell, 2006). In particular, as this Special Issue shows, the city provides important resources and mobilising capacities for activists that make it a particularly key site for conflict and potential social change. As the papers in this issue attest, the city provides a range of discursive, material and practical resources that activists can draw upon to prosecute conflict (D’Arcus; Routledge), enabling pragmatic connections to be forged between different groups (Chatterton). Cities are frequently centres of economic and political power (Bunnell et al; Glassman; Routledge) or media power (Glassman; Uitermark and Gielen) that provide targets or key contexts for political action. Because of their size and diversity of population, cities can frequently bring people together to share senses of injustice whereby solidarities can be forged across ethnic or class divides (Bunnell et al.). Importantly, while the urban in certain contexts can enable activism beyond the local (Panelli and Larner), in other contexts—for
example, because of the concentration of élite power within the city—the urban can act as a potential limit on rural transformation (Glassman; Routledge). Moreover, because urban space constitutes a vital and changing environment, demands for the ‘right to the city’ may themselves change over time from rights to inhabit urban space to rights to gather, perform and use public space (Leontidou). For many urban inhabitants, such rights can comprise the most fundamental right to the city of them all, the right to eat and survive (Heynen).

Because urban places are relational, and social relations flow through them, connecting us up increasingly to ‘distant others’ in complex ways, we need to think more about the political impacts—both positive and negative—of actions and interventions ‘locally’, what Doreen Massey (2004) has termed ‘geographies of responsibility’. Indeed, our responsibilities to particular places, in order to transform the relations within them and between them, is a point of action (or alter-globalisation) and can open up places for democratic engagements and for a grounded, practical internationalism (Massey, 2008).

Opportunities for social justice activism at the local urban scale have the possibility to be expanded, provided that local-scale actors can develop and mobilise a consciousness of justice and a multiscale understanding of place, and can utilise the politics of scale by linking together similar projects across scalar divisions (Pendras, 2002). Indeed, as David Schlosberg (2004, p. 534) has argued, while context is important in shaping struggles for urban justice, by confronting the underlying logics of inequity through multiple sites (see also Katz, 2001), a unified if not uniform ‘justice movement’ has the potential to be forged, that might extend far beyond the urban. Although the precise conceptions of justice will differ between activists of movements, unions, NGOs, etc. in different cultural and political-economic circumstances, broadly defined notions of justice pertaining to issues of redistribution (for example, class), recognition (for example, identity), appropriation and association are necessary to address and correct inequitable outcomes and the underlying processes that give rise to them.

Such notions of justice can act as potential master frames enabling different themes to be interconnected and convincing different political actors from different struggles and cultural contexts to join together in common struggle (della Porta et al., 2006; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009). These different notions of justice require knowledge of processes of inequality and injustice in the world and activists’ personal involvement in attempting to transform them, and incorporate all scales of transformative action—from the personal, the community, the city, the state, to international arenas and institutions.

Hence, there needs to be a move beyond place-specific and community-specific issues to a broader based, collective and urban perspective and action. This is not least because, as already stated, the contemporary city provides important resources and mobilising capacities for activists that make it a key site for conflict and potential social change. An academic-activist response to this has been the declaration of an urbanist agenda by the International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA) at its meeting in Paris and Caen, France, in 2002. The agenda called for the disempowerment of global economic players, making profits unsustainable, the elimination of borders for people, autonomy and social justice in everyday life and the liberation of the urban imagination (INURA, 2003). The strategic purpose of the declaration was to be an intervention at meetings of the international urban community—for example, for the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2003 and similar regional and local events.

From an activist perspective, this realisation of an associational politics has taken the
form of the creation, in 2007, in the US, of the ‘Right to the City Alliance’ between urban community groups, neighbourhood organisations, non-governmental organisations and voluntary organisations. For this alliance, the right to the city acts as a unifying agenda for different communities and interests and a recognition that issues such as environmental justice, economic security, homelessness, displacement, affordable housing, transport access and gentrification are interrelated and cross-cut by issues of class, race and gender. The goal is to construct collective capacity for local urban struggles to be involved in a national movement around the right to the city (Bromberg et al., 2007).

It is important to conceive of such struggles as those concerning spatial justice that include social, political, economic and environmental rights and that require the forging of solidarities and mutual responsibilities between urban (and non-urban) groups and communities, and the articulation of those rights within, between and beyond particular cities. Solidarity here is less altruistic (i.e. based upon the worthiness of, and sympathy towards the suffering of, distant others) than reciprocal (i.e. when activists in different groups draw connections between the suffering of others and their own plights or claims) and based upon shared threats or harm suffered as a consequence of common identities between activists (where identity is dynamic, contingent, contested and socially constructed and co-constituted with capitalism) (Reitan, 2007, pp. 20–21).

What will be crucial here is the political contexts in which deliberative and participatory institutions are deployed in order to address urban problems of poverty, marginalisation, etc. As Beaumont and Nicholls (2008) argue, successful participatory urban democratic practices are more likely to be achieved when urban communities are empowered or radicalised (for example, through struggle) prior to their negotiation with urban institutions (see also della Porta and Andretta, 2002; Stahre, 2004). They point to the contrast between the deployment of deliberative and participatory institutions in Brazil (where disenfranchised communities were empowered through the budgeting system) and in Britain (where disempowered communities were further marginalised through the top–down imposition of poverty management strategies).

Given the everyday pressures and constraints of the time and resources of urban groups and campaigns, an initial requirement for the construction of such alliances has been the construction of ‘convergence spaces’ (Routledge, 2003) where groups can meet one another, exchange experiences and plan collective strategies. While the future of the city includes more prosaic considerations such as managing water resources and transport planning, it is for the struggle for peoples’ rights to inhabit urban space (or any space for that matter) in a politically and economically just and environmentally sustainable way that will define the urban politics of the 21st century.

**Note**

1. See Boudreau (2003) on how ‘local democracy’ has been used as a discursive strategy in urban mobilisations in North America.

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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE


